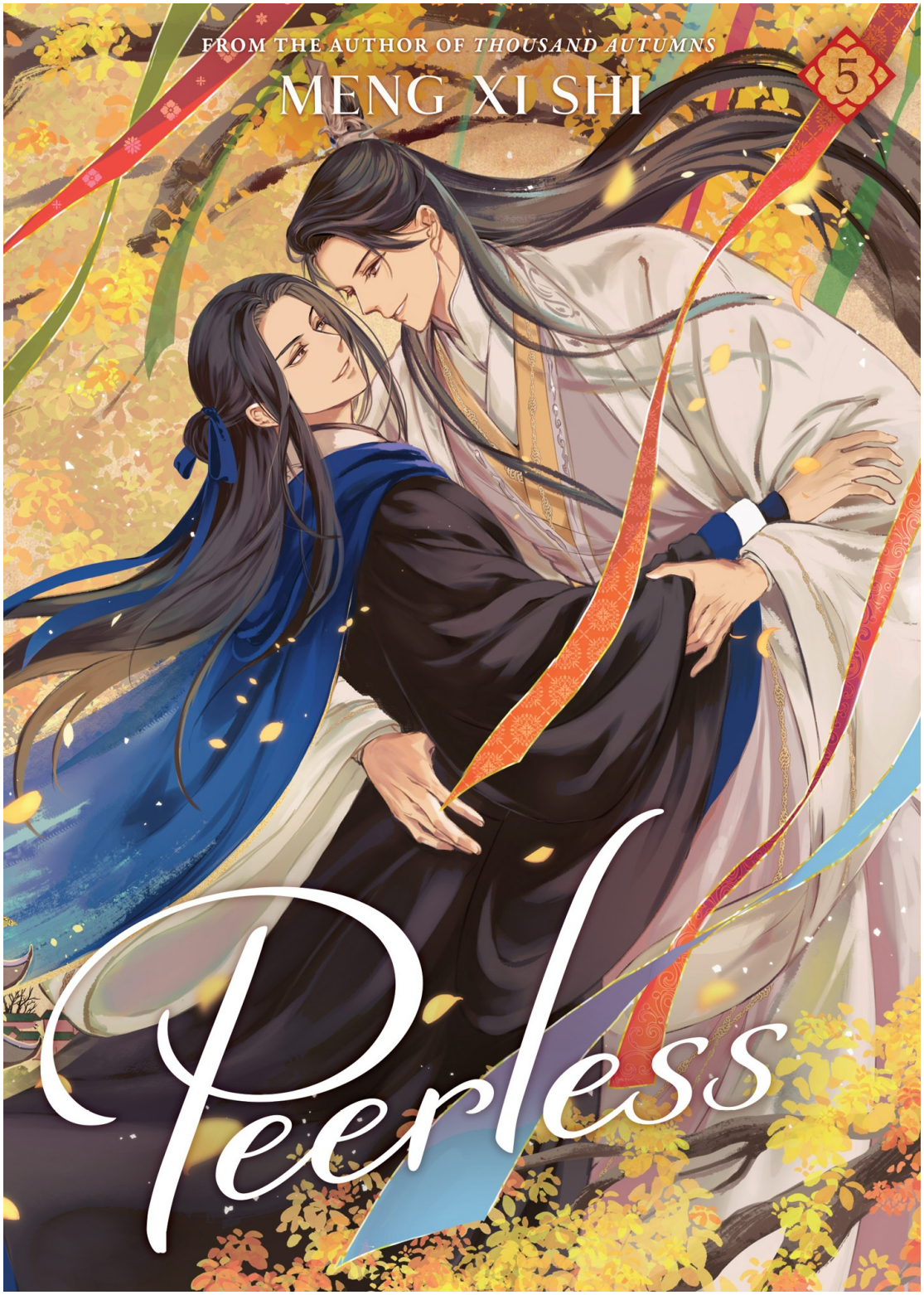
FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THOUSAND AUTUMNS*
MENG XI SHI
5
Peerless

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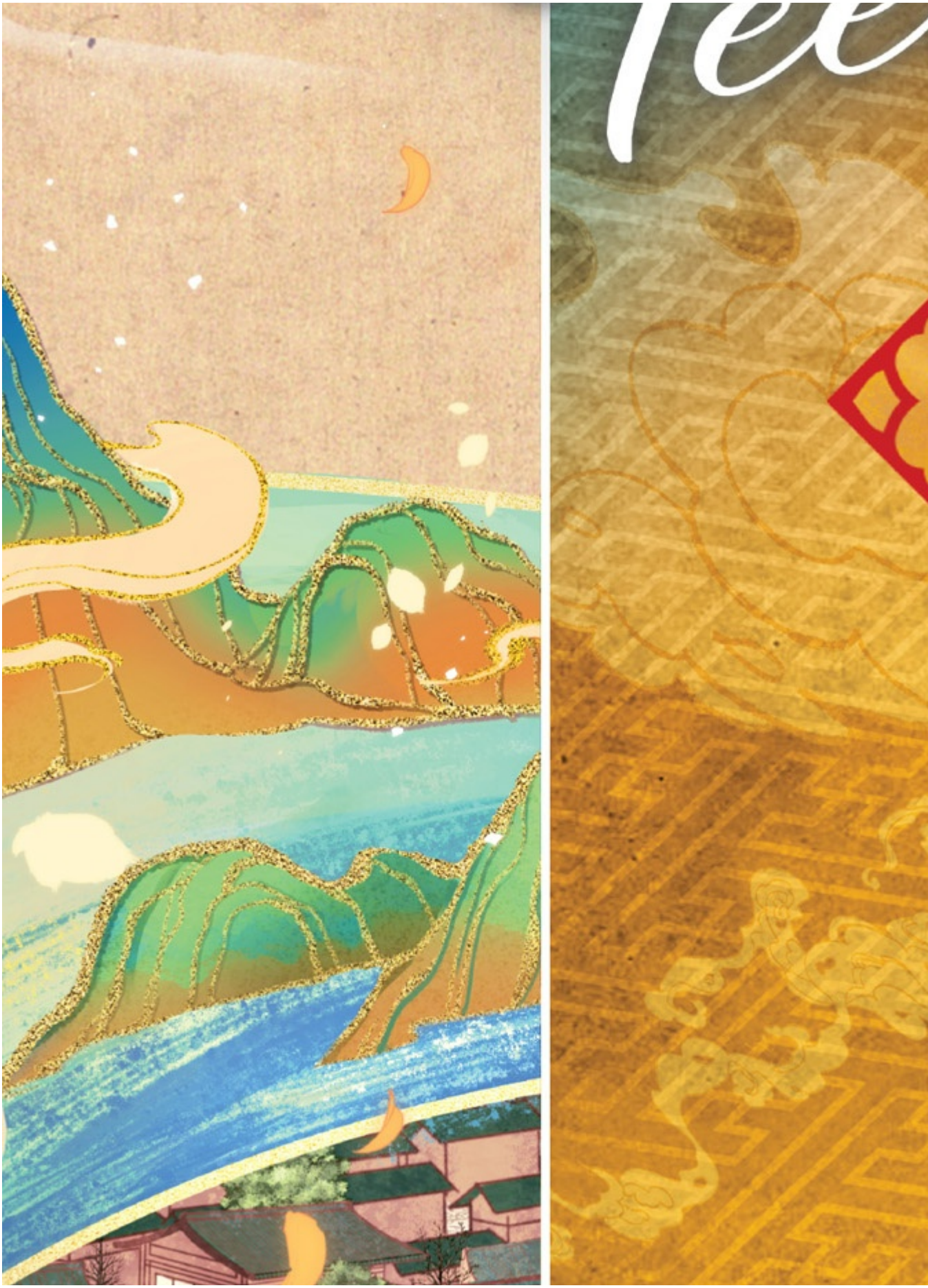

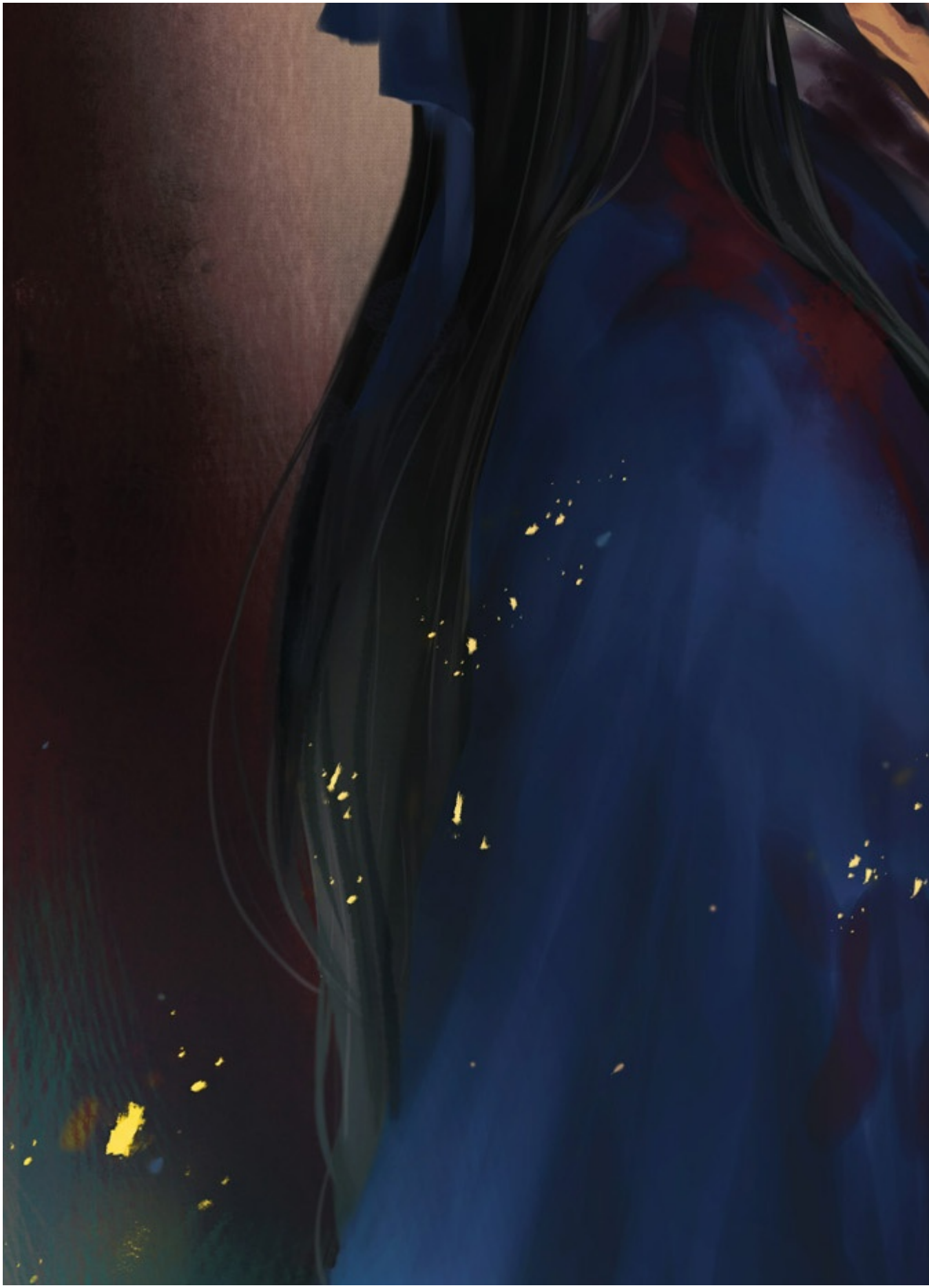

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Chapter 153

AT CUI BUQU'S REQUEST, Commandery Governor Yang Yun was escorted in. Aside from the listlessness of his gaze, he looked much the same as he always had. He even still wore the same clothes, though they were now rumpled and worn. But in everyone else's eyes, he was already a man fallen from grace.

Gone was the confidence of a leader who had everything under control. The court had yet to issue any official decree, so he remained commandery governor in name—but in truth, he was nothing more than a prisoner, the lowest of the low.

Yang Yun paid no mind to the many gazes upon him. He didn't even glance at Cui Buqu.

Pei Jingzhe placed a ledger in front of him.

Li Yan, the deputy magistrate, had concealed Yang Yun and the local bigwigs' dealings within a series of erotic paintings, which he used as an encoded ledger. It was a decently clever move: The paintings had provided him with both leverage over Yang Yun and insurance in case of emergency. Unfortunately, he'd crossed paths with the demon known as Feng Xiao. The deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau had turned the house Li Yan gifted his mistress upside down, and the paintings had thus fallen into Cui Buqu's hands.

At the time, Cui Buqu had deemed dealing with Yang Yun the most urgent task; he hadn't had time to ponder the specifics of what was hidden in the paintings. But after Governor Yang Yun and County Lieutenant Wu Yi's capture, Li Yan no longer had any reason to hold out. Hoping to lighten his own sentence, he happily copied out the accounts concealed within the paintings for Cui Buqu.

Only then did Cui Buqu and the others discover Li Yan's second layer of deception. Each painting contained two sets of accounts: one for Yang Yun and the wealthy landlords, and another that only Li Yan, Wu Yi, and the other county officials knew about. It seemed even Yang Yun's co-conspirators had deceived him and pocketed a portion of the embezzled grain for themselves.

If only Li Yan had applied his smarts to state matters. Had he used such clever methods of concealment to contribute to the court's secret communications with Goguryeo or the Khaganate, he could have actually been useful. Tragically, the deputy magistrate possessed skill but no insight into how to use it, which was why he'd been stuck as a mere county official his entire life. Soon he wouldn't even be that.

"This ledger lists the profits the Li and Ding families received from the grain donation policy and its tax exemptions. Is this correct?"

Cui Buqu's fair and slender fingers pushed the ledger closer to Yang Yun, who instinctively edged away. Those beautiful, harmless fingers were monstrous to him; his heart shuddered.

"It is correct," he said, voice hoarse.

"Governor." Li Geng, the patriarch of the Li family, spoke in tones of displeasure. "You haven't even opened it to check. How would you know if it's correct or not? You may be from the imperial court, but you can't distort the facts!"

Yang Yun's previous arrogance had vanished without a trace. When he heard Li Geng's words, he confessed everything, as if possessed. "Although I bear the surname Yang, my parents passed when I was young. I was never close to His Majesty. I was left destitute; I wanted to take advantage of my time in office to amass what wealth I could. When the floods came to Guangqian Commandery, I planned to keep some grain in the government stores to prevent the situation from worsening. It was Li Geng who urged me to take it all—during a disaster, he said, grain is more precious than gold. Those who hoard it can double their profits. The court wouldn't just stand by and leave the commandery without any grain. When the imperial censor came, we could persuade him to petition the court for aid on our behalf. The court would allocate more grain, and that could be used to feed the victims of the—"

"That decision was yours alone!" Li Geng, no longer able to remain still, had leapt to his feet. "What does it have to do with us?!"

Yang Yun stared at him coldly and said nothing.

Li Geng took a deep breath and turned to Rong Qing and Cui Buqu. "My lords, Yang Yun is the commandery governor. He wielded incredible power here. If he hadn't taken the lead, would we have dared such a thing? All we did was flatter him a bit to earn his favor; at the end of the day, Yang Yun was the one who made the calls!"

He had quickly realized that between Cui Buqu and Rong Qing, it was Cui Buqu who had the greater authority. His gaze remained fixed on Cui Buqu as he spoke, hoping to gauge his reaction.

But he was soon disappointed. Cui Buqu was calm and un-perturbed. His posture had remained unchanged from the moment he sat down; even his eyebrows never twitched. Ignoring Li Geng's protestations, he glanced at him and offered, "It's not too late to hand over the grain you've been hoarding and reduce your sentence."

Li Geng's face spasmed. Bitterly, he said, "My family truly has no grain left. If you don't believe me, send someone to investigate!"

"None?" Cui Buqu asked. "Truly?"

His voice was so soft it would have been inaudible if Li Geng had been just a bit farther away. Had Feng Xiao been present, he'd have been first to warn Li Geng that this gentle tone was an omen of impending misfortune.

Unfortunately, Feng Xiao was not on the scene. Li Geng nodded, earnest and fawning. "We really don't! If we did, I'd hand it over right away! It's all thanks to Cui-xiansheng and Censor Rong that our city has remained so peaceful throughout all this. It would have been much worse if those disaster victims were allowed to create mayhem."

Cui Buqu chuckled, as if pleased by Li Geng's flattery. He turned to Pei Jingzhe. "Go fetch them."

Pei Jingzhe returned with five people. Or, more precisely, five bodies.

Li Yan, Wu Yi, and three others whose names Li Geng could not recall had all been reduced to cold corpses. Blood both fresh and dried stained their clothes, attesting to the torture they'd suffered. Not even their faces had been spared: One corpse had an eye gouged out, leaving a dark, bloody hole. Despite their disfigurement, the appearance and clothing of the deceased were recognizable to anyone who had frequent dealings with them.

The stench of blood permeated the hall, overpowering even the incense. No one present had ever witnessed such a gruesome sight, and the room echoed with the sound of retching. Rong Qing's face turned green as he covered his mouth and nose and averted his eyes.

Li Geng stared at Wu Yi's mangled corpse long enough for the bloody gash on Wu Yi's forehead to etch itself vividly into his mind. As the sound of vomiting filled his ears, nausea clawed its way up his throat until he, too, couldn't stop himself from emptying his stomach of his most recent meal.

Blood, decay, and the sickly smell of bile. Just one was enough to suffocate a person. Assaulted by all three together, everyone was certain the stench would kill them. A few rose to flee the stifling room, only to freeze in the face of the gleaming blades of the Zuoyue guards at the door.

Yang Yun trembled. He looked at Cui Buqu as if he was a demon. "Wu Yi and Li Yan were both court officials. You may be the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, but you have *no right* to kill them—"

"But I've already done so," said Cui Buqu gently.

Yang Yun stared in shock. He suddenly felt the beating he'd received within the secret chamber wasn't so bad after all. At least he'd escaped with his life.

Cui Buqu turned to Li Geng and the rest of Guangqian Comm-andery's wealthy families. "Wu Yi and Li Yan were accomplices in the embezzlement of relief grain. As you can see, they have been dealt with. Yang Yun is the mastermind; he will be escorted to the capital to stand trial. I won't touch him. But your lives are even less significant than Li Yan's."

Li Geng had lost what remained of his composure with his lunch. He glared balefully at Cui Buqu. "I'll have you know, I'm related to the current Duke of Tang —"

He was a clever man; rationally, he knew threatening someone with his connections would only enrage them. But this current turn of events had him in completely over his head. He'd lost his confidence and was grasping at straws.

Cui Buqu calmly interrupted him. "I've just arrested the emperor's nephew. You are merely a distant relative of the Duke of Tang, and many times removed at that. Whether he would even acknowledge your connection is an open question. Let me ask you one last time: Will you hand over the grain?"

The two locked eyes. Li Geng's chest heaved; he knew the wise choice was to obediently give up his spoils. But he'd been in Guangqian County too long. Though he held no official position, the Li family name was synonymous with authority here. Even Huang Lüe and the other officials under Yang Yun's command had shown them the utmost respect.

To submit to this outsider was too hard a pill to swallow.

Cui Buqu could see Li Geng's hesitation. After a few moments he said, "Very well."

Very well? Very well what?

Li Geng was still staring at Cui Buqu in bewilderment as he said, "Invite Deputy Chief Feng inside."

In no time, Feng Xiao appeared.

Although Li Geng didn't recognize this man, he was instantly captivated by his handsome appearance. Judging by the hush that fell over the hall, he was not alone; the moment Feng Xiao entered the hall, even the nauseating stench seemed to lessen.

"This is Feng Xiao, the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau," said Cui Buqu.

Many, not recognizing the name, looked around in puzzlement—but the officials sat up at once. Li Geng, too, had heard of this bureau.

Feng Xiao acknowledged neither the introduction nor the onlookers. He strode straight up to Li Geng and scrutinized him with a haughty gaze. "You are the head of the Li family?"

"Yes," Li Geng replied instinctively. It was the last thing he said before Feng Xiao's sword plunged into his chest.

He had yet to even cup his hands in greeting—he never imagined that single *yes* would be his final word.

A shriek as shrill as a woman's went up as blood sprayed the man beside him—such a sound from the mouth of a grown man was enough to make any listener wrinkle their brow. Li Geng's eldest son shouted and lunged toward his father. A kick from Pei Jingzhe sent him crashing to the ground. Feng Xiao withdrew his sword from Li Geng's chest, and the Li family patriarch collapsed woodenly backward.

A sword through the heart sent a powerful message.

Before chaos could erupt in the hall, Cui Buqu coughed. "Everyone shut up, or you'll be next."

The crowd fought to keep their voices and expressions under control. A few slapped terrified hands over their own mouths.

"I've already ordered Li Geng executed. I don't mind sending a few more heads rolling." Cui Buqu scanned the room. Almost everyone ducked their heads, too afraid to meet his eyes.

The head of the Ding family was first to come to his senses. Ignoring Li Geng's son on the ground, he crashed to his knees. "I'll hand it over! I'll hand it over!" he cried. "My family has surplus grain stored just a street away. I'll take you there right now!"

Cui Buqu sighed regretfully. "If only you had done this earlier, no one would have had to die."

Everyone else surged forward to pledge allegiance. They shivered as they knelt, fearing their lives would be forfeit if they spoke too late.

Pei Jingzhe shot a puzzled look at Feng Xiao, who was standing dutifully behind Cui Buqu like a background prop. Suddenly he realized: His lord was still in seclusion. This must once again be Qin Miaoyu in disguise. No wonder his behavior had been so off. The real Feng Xiao would never be this quiet; at minimum, he'd brag about his own swordsmanship, which was flawless and unerring.

As if he'd heard Pei Jingzhe's thoughts, the false Feng Xiao turned and threw him a playful wink, completely out of character.

Pei Jingzhe's lips twitched.

Chapter 154

RONG QING WATCHED, his heart racing in fear.

He'd known Cui Buqu would use both carrot and stick to force these people to hand over their remaining grain. Without this, the city's residents would starve, to say nothing of the displaced victims of the floods.

Still, Rong Qing hadn't expected Cui Buqu to be so ruthless. He had killed Wu Yi and Li Yan like it was nothing. Even the head of the Li family had met the same fate, bleeding out before their eyes. Everyone was stunned. Rong Qing had braced himself to spend the entire day persuading these stubborn mules. Instead, a single iron-fisted blow from Cui Buqu had cowed them in an instant.

Rong Qing watched them all bow their tear-stained faces, pleading before Cui Buqu, and realized the grain shortage in the county was as good as resolved. The worries of the past few days were swept away.

Yet Cui Buqu showed no sign of joy. His demeanor toward these wealthy families remained unchanged throughout—cold and unsmiling, like the incarnation of King Yama himself.

"You've purchased your lives with this grain. I hope you will keep your promises—if not, I don't mind sending a few more of you to keep Li Geng company. Understand?"

Everyone trembled. When King Yama himself was speaking, who would dare deceive him? Any such thoughts were long extinguished.

Cui Buqu glanced at Feng Xiao by his side. "Deputy Chief Feng, thank you. The Jiejian Bureau's hard work is certainly appreciated."

Qin Miaoyu thought this a bit strange. Cui Buqu knew who she really was, so why address her so deliberately in public? Was he trying to buttress his actions here with the Jiejian Bureau's reputation? She blinked, suddenly sure she had fallen into a trap.

Before she could consider this further, Pei Jingzhe called to the assembly, "Please follow me."

Time was of the essence: Where the grain was stored, and in what quantities, all needed to be meticulously recorded. They couldn't allow the families a moment for second thoughts, nor allow the clerks any opening to line their own pockets.

The crowd was long since nauseous from the reek of the hall. They scrambled out the door after him as if fleeing a fire.

Rong Qing looked at the bodies strewn across the floor and furrowed his brow. "Cui-xiansheng, regardless of their crimes, Wu Yi and the others were officials of the court. Such rash action is sure to draw criticism when we return to the capital. If you must petition for a defense, I am willing to co-sign."

Cui Buqu's face showed none of the gratitude Rong Qing had anticipated at this offer to share the burden of responsibility. His expression remained inscrutable as he said, "Bring them here."

A moment later, Rong Qing's eyes went round.

The Zuoyue guards pushed two men through the door. They hung their heads, their faces filled with despair, like defeated soldiers returning from battle.

Were these not Wu Yi and Li Yan?

Rong Qing looked at them, then at the bodies on the ground. He felt like he was dreaming. "What's…" *What's going on?*

Qin Miaoyu, still wearing Feng Xiao's face, took it upon herself to explain: "Cui-xiansheng didn't kill them; he just used the corpses from last night's tavern brawl to scare that lot."

In truth, disguise was not one of Qin Miaoyu's skills, and her imitation of Feng Xiao's voice was far from perfect. She'd only succeeded that night in the tavern because their enemies had been unfamiliar with Feng Xiao. Aware of this, she spoke now in her own soft, feminine voice. The jarring mismatch between the evidence of his eyes and ears compelled Rong Qing to avert his gaze.

"Then is Li Geng also still alive?" He breathed a sigh of relief.

Qin Miaoyu was unimpressed. "He's dead! You saw it with your own eyes, didn't you?"

Rong Qing froze, glancing at the fallen Li Geng. The man's face was twisted in death, the fatal wound through his chest still oozing blood.

The Li family's eldest son was both angry and aggrieved, but he valued his life; he didn't dare rush forward and grab his father's body. Even he had obediently followed Pei Jingzhe out of the hall to register their grain.

So—Li Geng was the only one dead.

Rong Qing didn't know how to feel. He had offered to share the responsibility with Cui Buqu, but seeing Wu Yi and Li Yan still alive had given him hope they could avoid death altogether. If only they'd managed to convince Li Geng instead of killing him, they'd have won without any bloodshed at all, making their victory all the sweeter.

Yang Yun leapt up, jabbing a finger at Cui Buqu. "You lied to me, you bastard! You didn't have the guts to kill them!"

Cui Buqu regarded him coolly. Rong Qing thought he might order Qin Miaoyu to strike Yang Yun. Instead, he grabbed Yang Yun's hair himself and slammed him into a nearby pillar with a muffled *thud*.

Yang Yun had had only water and no food for several meals; he lacked the strength to fight back. He gave a pained cry and covered his mouth and nose, hunching as blood dripped through his fingers.

Rong Qing felt his own nose twinge in sympathy.

"Make no mistake: It's not that I cannot kill you," Cui Buqu said. "I simply do not wish to. I advise you not to spit on my kindness. If you refuse to cooperate, I will throw you before the refugees and tell them you're the one who left their families to starve. I'll retrieve you after they beat you halfway to your grave."

Yang Yun squatted, covering his face and whimpering. It was unclear if he was weeping or moaning in pain.

Fortunately for him, Cui Buqu's chronic illnesses left him lacking in strength, or Yang Yun would be sporting a broken nose rather than just a bloody one.

Cui Buqu stepped forward. Yang Yun shrank back.

Suddenly Cui Buqu's expression shifted. Crinkling his brow in concern, he asked, "Governor Yang, how have you hurt yourself again? If something's troubling you, please tell us. Don't hold back."

Rong Qing, watching, was just as speechless as Yang Yun.

The governor felt like crying. He was currently too feeble to beat even Cui Buqu in a fight. Even if he could, he wouldn't dare—not with Qin Miaoyu and the Zuoyue guards glowering at him. But Cui Buqu had truly driven him to desperation: Tears mixed with the blood streaming down his face as he huddled, trembling.

Cui Buqu bent down to pat his shoulder and offer a few words of consolation. "Governor, you should get some proper rest. I'll take you back to the capital in a few days."

Rong Qing's eyes had been opened. If he had been in charge, could he have resolved the situation so quickly? Would he have dared to resolve it like *this*?

He knew he would not.

It wasn't because he wielded less authority than Cui Buqu. Imperial censors operated under the emperor's authority and had a similar prerogative to act first and report later. He could take a life if required, so long as he was prepared to explain himself before the court. But Rong Qing couldn't bring himself to be so ruthless. Forget Wu Yi—even if he was confronted with Li Yan, who had arguably done the most to deceive him, he would likely waver, unable to bring the knife down.

Within a mere half a day, Cui Buqu had exercised both murder and deception to force these greedy landowners into coughing up what they'd swallowed.

Yang Yun surely loathed Cui Buqu to the bone, but what could he do? Cui Buqu held damning evidence against him. Escaping this disaster with his life was already great good fortune. Whatever mischief he got up to in the future, whatever connections or identity he used to rebuild himself, he'd never dare provoke Cui Buqu again, not even if he had ten times the guts.

Rong Qing wiped the last traces of doubt from his heart and finally reached acceptance.

***

The most pressing matter had been settled, but Cui Buqu was feeling too poorly to revel in his triumph.

After instructing the guards to lock Yang Yun up, he'd returned to the relay station. His first thought was to go see Feng Xiao—but he was still in seclusion after his qi deviation and shouldn't be disturbed. Perhaps Cui Buqu could just stand at the entrance to see whether the inner room remained shut. This would be enough to tell him if Feng Xiao was out of danger.

Just as Cui Buqu reached the courtyard where Feng Xiao was staying, he stopped in his tracks.

A pain, sharp as a needle, pricked his chest and quickly spread through his body. He struggled to breathe. An unseen hand seemed to wrap around his throat and

push him underwater. He fought to surface, yet his efforts were futile. The breath he drew through his nose thinned, and his limbs grew limp and heavy as if weighed down by stones.

These were his old symptoms flaring up again. Shortness of breath and heart palpitations—not an infrequent combination for him. Under normal circumstances, an ice-fungus pill could alleviate them, but he had none left. He'd given the last three to Feng Xiao. Qiao Xian had gone to a neighboring county to collect herbs to refine him new ones; she'd be gone some time yet.

He hadn't anticipated his old ailment would rear its head so quickly, yet the symptoms overtook him now with incredible ferocity.

He must have overexerted himself these past few days. First he'd wracked his brain for a way to deal with Yang Yun and his men, then he'd ventured out in the rain to search for Feng Xiao at the tavern. Considering the state of his body, the outcome was hardly surprising.

This was also why Qiao Xian had kept quiet about Feng Xiao's predicament. She hadn't wanted him to give out the ice-fungus pills. But a qi deviation was far more dangerous than labored breathing. He could endure it—after so many years, he was used to it.

Eventually, the pain would pass.

Cui Buqu's pace was agonizingly slow. He kept a hand on the wall for support as he walked, putting one foot in front of the other. His back was less straight than normal, but not so much that anything was obviously wrong. His expression was utterly calm. So calm it was as if he was merely admiring the scenery as he passed. No onlooker would guess he was in agony.

Bone-deep, heart-devouring agony.

Pei Jingzhe stopped to greet Cui Buqu as he passed. "Are you here to see my lord, Cui-xiansheng?"

"Mm," said Cui Buqu. He added placidly, "But I can't walk any farther. You'll have to help me."

If Cui Buqu said he couldn't walk, he truly couldn't. This man had an iron will and a pain tolerance equal to that of any top martial artist. It was only a pity that his body was like cracking wood and crumbling stone.

Stunned, Pei Jingzhe quickly took his elbow as he swayed. "I'll call a physician right away!"

"No need." Cui Buqu's brow was furrowed, but his voice was steady. "The physicians here can't compare to Qiao Xian, and she's gone to get medicine. Just help me back so I can rest."

Recalling the three ice-fungus pills, Pei Jingzhe felt a twist of guilt. "Mm," he murmured, not daring to say more as he hoisted Cui Buqu onto his back and carried him to his room.

"Don't worry about me; I'll just lie down for a bit," Cui Buqu said hoarsely.

He slipped out of his shoes and lay down without even changing his clothes, wrapping the blankets around himself. He'd never been the type to complain or moan in pain. Both would be meaningless—other than the ice-fungus pill, no medicine was effective. Rather than waste his breath explaining this to Pei Jingzhe, it would be more prudent to conserve his energy and weather this flare-up.

Pei Jingzhe left; the door snicked gently shut behind him. Cui Buqu exhaled slowly as another wave of pain washed over him. He closed his eyes.

He could barely recall the first time his illness had flared up like this.

It would have been back at the Cui family manor, after he struck back against a younger child of the clan who'd bullied him. The other boy had run away to tattle, and a prejudiced elder had locked Cui Buqu in the woodshed with instructions to reflect on his wrongdoing.

It'd been a winter night. Icy winds had rushed through the cracks in the door and windows, howling within the empty woodshed. Cui Buqu had been very young then; regardless of how precocious he was for his age, there were times even he suffered defeat. After all, he was only a child.

The elder had likely planned to lock him up for no more than an hour, but it had happened to be the day of the Winter Solstice. Everyone was busy with various rites to worship the ancestors, and both the inside and outside of the manor bustled with noise and activity. Who would remember the nameless child in the woodshed? Cui Buqu froze the entire night. Not until almost dawn did someone find him.

After that night, everyone had thought his death was nigh, yet he'd miraculously pulled through—Cui Buqu had survived again. Even Cui Yong had had to admit the name he'd given this child was ominous. Cui Jie, *steps*. He was truly like the weeds at the base of stone steps, resilient and indomitable.

From that moment on, Cui Buqu's heart palpitations and asthma had worsened, becoming severe enough to threaten his life. Still, he clawed his way back from the brink of death time and time again. It was as if his life was so cold and hard even King Yama refused to take it.

Over the course of his life, he'd experienced countless such flare-ups. It was a familiar pain, almost a part of him. But since he'd begun taking the ice-fungus pills, most mild flare-ups no longer affected him. Even major flare-ups became manageable.

Cui Buqu thought of Feng Xiao.

His qi deviation had left him in a precarious state, but Cui Buqu had a vague yet unshakable feeling that he would pull through. Perhaps it was only an illusion brought about by Feng Xiao's overbearing arrogance.

The good die young, while the wicked live to a thousand.

The corners of Cui Buqu's lips quirked up.

His forehead and the back of his neck were clammy with sweat, and his robes were soaked through. Even the blanket was damp where it touched his body. But the thought of Feng Xiao seemed to take his mind off the pain, and the passing of time became a little less torturous.

That man's face took shape in his mind's eye. It was a supremely beautiful face, its most outstanding feature those shining and gracefully curved eyes. How unfortunate that some of its charm was lost whenever he opened his mouth to speak.

Perhaps Cui Buqu's pain had pushed him to the point of hallucinating—he suddenly felt as if someone was blowing lightly on the back of his neck.

A ghost in broad daylight?

Cui Buqu didn't have the strength to turn and look. He registered a hand touching his neck, while another slipped under the quilt, landing unerringly on his wrist.

True qi, rich and pure, surged from his acupoints into his body. It was as if he was bathed in warm sunlight, and the pain in his chest, though it didn't disappear entirely, seemed to lighten as well. He knew of only one person whose foundation of true qi was so solid he could afford to waste it like this.

Feng Xiao, Cui Buqu mouthed. He didn't have the strength to voice it aloud. But a bud of joy sprouted within his heart, bursting through the parched soil.

As expected, Feng Xiao had successfully emerged from seclusion.

Cui Buqu was no martial artist, but he knew that with each obstacle a martial practitioner overcame, their abilities would increase in turn. If Feng Xiao was here before him, he must have surpassed himself and taken his martial arts to even greater heights.

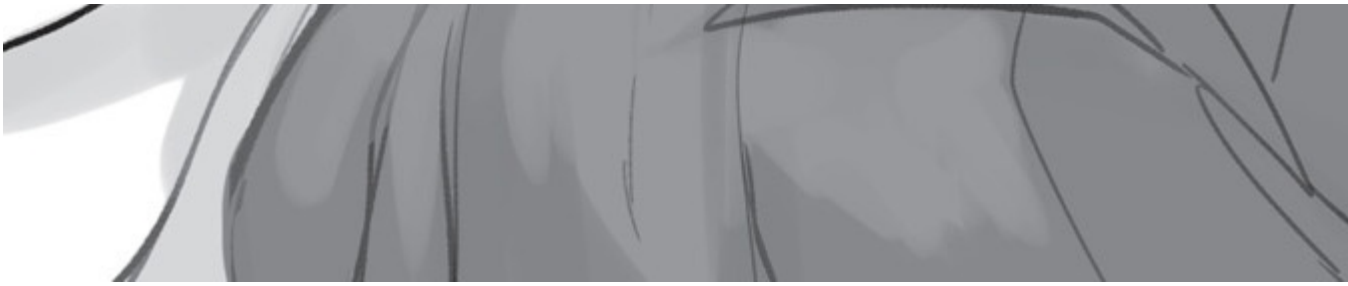
"In exchange for those three ice-fungus pills, my venerable self is willing to pledge myself to you. What do you say?" Feng Xiao bent his head and captured Cui Buqu's lips. True qi poured in, flowing from his lips and tongue to flood Cui Buqu's mouth.

Cui Buqu was stunned—was he healing him or shamelessly taking advantage? He sat frozen, unable to make a sound as he tilted his head back and yielded to Feng Xiao's demands. His neck curved in a fragile arc securely supported by Feng Xiao's hand. Their bodies were separated by the covers, yet intimately entwined.

The instant his mouth was free, Cui Buqu was quick to express his opinion. "Get out."

Undeterred, Feng Xiao kissed his eyelids until they blushed red. Reflexive tears brimmed in Cui Buqu's eyes, on the verge of spilling over.

Chief Cui was at his limit. "I said get the hell out!"



Chapter 155

NATURALLY, Feng Xiao did no such thing. Instead, he provoked Cui Buqu further. “Push me away if you can.”

Cui Buqu was using all his strength just to breathe, completely dependent on Feng Xiao’s internal energy to relieve his suffering. Even if he had the wherewithal to push him off, he couldn’t very well bite the hand that was feeding him.

Having been given an inch, Deputy Chief Feng took his mile. He pulled Cui Buqu into his arms and buried his face in the crook of his neck, the heat of his breath leaving a searing trail from the corner of Cui Buqu’s eye to behind his ear.

Feng Xiao was a fastidious person himself and applied an even harsher standard to others. Rarely did he allow anyone so close to him. Even his maids were required to wash their hands thrice just to help him change. Yet he found the astringent fragrance of medicine on Cui Buqu uniquely alluring, both pleasant and distinct. He didn’t hesitate to gather that delicate, bony frame to himself, leaving his mark on the pale and icy skin.

Feng Xiao felt that he was unwell—profoundly unwell. What was more frightening was that he didn’t want a cure.

“Giving me those three ice-fungus pills was as useless as casting a stone into the sea. If my mind failed to recover, or if the qi deviation destroyed my body entirely, I wouldn’t just be unable to return your kindness. The Jiejian Bureau might accuse you of aggravating my injuries. Cui Buqu, you’ve never been one to engage in losing ventures; your calculations are always flawless. Don’t tell me this didn’t occur to you.”

He didn’t expect Cui Buqu to give him an honest answer, but he obstinately asked anyway.

Their eyes met.

In Cui Buqu’s eyes, Feng Xiao saw feebleness, pain, and exhaustion. His was a broken body riddled with unending illness. His fragile shell couldn’t withstand a palm strike at half strength, and a mere gust of wind or fall of rain would leave him bedridden for weeks. It was a body always on death’s door; any physician, upon examining it, would come to the same conclusion: Cui Buqu wasn’t long for this world.

Yet the owner of that body had somehow lived to this day.

Very few understood how resilient that crumbling wood was, but Feng Xiao did. If Cui Buqu had been able to practice martial arts, his achievements might surpass even Feng Xiao’s. Their world teemed with regrets and what-ifs; in the end, much came down to fate. Yet fate was something Cui Buqu put no stock in. He’d dragged his broken body this far with a will firmer and more unyielding than anything.

“You did a favor for someone who might not be able to return it, even at risk to your own life. That’s not like you.”

Cui Buqu closed his eyes. The soft redness at the corners grew more pronounced. Like a dab of rouge, it added a touch of allure; the color transformed his

face from wan to vivid.

Feng Xiao was quite pleased with himself.

"Aren't you awake now?" Cui Buqu replied hoarsely.

"But what if I didn't wake up?" Dissatisfied, Feng Xiao continued to press him.

Cui Buqu's body was cold. Only by holding him tightly could Feng Xiao extract a bit of warmth. If he wanted to breach Cui Buqu's defenses and glimpse his innermost heart, this was his only chance. Cui Buqu opened his eyes slowly. "If you didn't wake up…the Jiejian Bureau would have a debt to repay."

Feng Xiao was momentarily speechless. "You really won't let anyone else win, even a little," he said, his tone faintly sardonic.

"Every time I look at you, I feel like your high standards are truly justified. A face like yours is a rare find indeed." Cui Buqu sighed.

"Finally you've said something sensible." The frustrated peacock was instantly appeased. He puffed up with pride, ready to spread his vibrant tail.

"It's only such a pity you can speak."

Deputy Chief Feng blinked as Cui Buqu gazed at him earnestly. "A flowering oleander is beautiful adorning its branch; there's no need for it to make a sound."

Feng Xiao's voice rose slightly. "So you were using 'oleander' to insult me?"

Cui Buqu coughed. "Weren't you mentally cursing me as an invalid yourself?"

"Of course not," Feng Xiao said. "I was cursing—"

Their eyes met again. Cui Buqu's gaze was steady, light glimmering within his inky irises.

Feng Xiao caught himself just in time. "I mean—I'm as fresh as the spring breeze, pure as moonlight. Those like myself naturally have a heart free of selfishness and full of sincerity. Unlike you."

Cui Buqu snorted. He didn't have the energy to bicker. Still, their conversation had distracted him from his agony, and his body had warmed a little in Feng Xiao's arms. It wasn't as unbearable as it had been.

Feng Xiao forged ahead—if Cui Buqu refused to give him an answer, he'd come up with one himself. "You gave me the three ice-fungus pills because you were sure I wouldn't die."

That's right. Even if the whole world perished, you'd probably be fine, Cui Buqu thought to himself. *Someone as self-obsessed as you would be happy alone as long as you could spend your days as resplendent as a peony*. But he didn't show the slightest hint of it on his face—as if Feng Xiao needed another reason to congratulate himself.

"The ice-fungus pills are poisonous," he replied coldly. "I wanted to see if I could manage to kill you while you were ill."

Feng Xiao smiled. "Cui Buqu, I love the way you spout blatant lies with a straight face. You're too adorable."

As if to prove just how much he loved this adorable side of Cui Buqu, he surged forward in another imperious kiss, seizing the chance to indulge himself. He swept the lingering aroma of medicine from Cui Buqu's mouth, marking him both

inside and out with his own scent. Only then was he satisfied.

When he felt how still Cui Buqu was beneath him, he said knowingly, “You can’t even pretend to resist anymore. You must have been yearning after my beauty for ages but were afraid I’d reject you. Is that why you’re playing hard to get?” Without waiting for Cui Buqu to respond, Deputy Chief Feng sighed. “Well, I shall take pity on you. Who made me such a thoughtful and gentle person? I’ve agreed.”

Agreed to what? thought Cui Buqu. *Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself, Feng-er?* But what was there left for Cui Buqu to say? His only reply was a cold laugh.

A knock sounded at the door, and Qin Miaoyu’s voice drifted in. “Chief Cui, it’s me.”

“Come in.” His symptoms had passed, and the pain had somewhat abated. His voice was no longer so feeble.

“Chief—” The rest of the words froze on her tongue as she spotted Feng Xiao. She suddenly remembered she was still wearing the face of her superior. The two Feng Xiaos stared at each other, making an absurd picture.

After the battle at the tavern, Qin Miaoyu should have removed her disguise, but Cui Buqu had told her to keep it on. Since Feng Xiao had asked them to heed Cui Buqu’s orders before he entered seclusion, she’d happily complied, using the guise of Deputy Chief Feng to intimidate the likes of Wu Yi. Now, in the presence of the man himself, she felt a bit sheepish.

Feng Xiao cocked a brow, and Qin Miaoyu gave him a simpering smile. Despite his frivolous attitude, her superior wasn’t an easygoing man. Everyone possessed two faces: If Feng Xiao’s first face was flamboyant and narcissistic, his second was ruthless and unforgiving toward those he deemed enemies. Qin Miaoyu had suffered greatly at his hands once already and had no wish to tread that path again.

But with Chief Cui present, her lord would surely spare her—right?

As she thought, Feng Xiao cast her no more than a fleeting glance.

Qin Miaoyu breathed a discreet sigh of relief, then started in on her report: “Chief Cui, Li Geng’s eldest son provided us with the location, and we’ve already searched and found the grain. It’s all fresh. The Li family will deny it vehemently, but it must be part of the batch the court sent for the relief efforts. We’ve also uncovered considerable quantities of grain at a few other households. Our people are still totaling the amounts, but we estimate it makes up around a quarter of that sent by the court. At present, that’s all we can find. The rest was sold at high prices to local villagers during the initial shortage; there’s no way to recover it.”

Cui Buqu nodded. “Tell them to keep the records in good order. Round up a few of Li Geng’s sons and some members of the Ding family; we’ll have Rong Qing escort them back to the capital.”

Qin Miaoyu was puzzled. “What for?”

“I said I wouldn’t kill them, but I didn’t say I wouldn’t interrogate them. The Li and Ding families have amassed enormous wealth working with Yang Yun. Once they reach the capital, they’ll do everything in their power to evade responsibility. I’ll notify Zhangsun to have them first brought to the Zuoyue Bureau for questioning. These wealthy families have many sons; internal strife must already be brewing within their clans.” Cui Buqu smiled coldly. “If we exploit those conflicts, we may

uncover a fair number of secrets."

"Yes sir," said Qin Miaoyu respectfully.

Cui Buqu's scheming came as no surprise to her. From the moment she'd met the Zuoyue chief, he'd been someone who always thought three steps ahead. This might have posed no challenge to a healthy man, but considering the state of Cui Buqu's body, wasn't it exhausting to maintain such mental acuity? Several impressions rose in her mind: Mental and physical depletion. A shortened lifespan. A lamp burning the last of its oil.

None of them were particularly auspicious.

Feng Xiao, still sitting beside him, finally spoke. "Qin Miaoyu. I presume you've been carrying out his orders using my face these past few days?"

Qin Miaoyu instinctively glanced at Cui Buqu. He'd closed his eyes and turned his head away, obscuring his expression—his posture indicated he had fallen asleep.

I've been had!

The faint unease that had niggled at Qin Miaoyu for several days reared up in full force.

The day they had addressed the wealthy families, Cui Buqu had told her Feng Xiao was in seclusion, but that he needed to borrow Feng Xiao's authority. Firstly, the Jiejian Bureau's reputation would carry more weight—more people knew their name, so their involvement would stabilize the situation quickly. Second, although she lacked Feng Xiao's absurd strength, these wealthy landlords weren't martial artists either. Feng Xiao's presence alone would suffice to intimidate them.

Qin Miaoyu hadn't thought much of it. She was a spy from the Jiejian Bureau now—no longer did she need to treat her orders with caution. As Feng Xiao had commanded, she obeyed Cui Buqu without hesitation. Perhaps she'd been comfortable too long and forgotten her previous vigilance. Only now did she realize what was amiss.

Outsiders didn't know she was Qin Miaoyu; they would only see her as Feng Xiao. They would think this case was jointly handled by the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus; if they offended anyone, both bureaus would bear the burden.

The Zuoyue Bureau was responsible for cases related to the jianghu. If not for the interference of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, they would have no true authority to act here. The defeat of the martial experts at the tavern, Xiao Lü's severe wounds—most of the credit for these lay with the Jiejian Bureau. But no observer would know this; they would only believe the Zuoyue Bureau had done a splendid job.

And what of the Jiejian Bureau? For all their efforts, any blame for offending the families of Guangqian Commandery would fall on them. When Cui Buqu went to claim credit, all he'd have to say was a breezy *It was all thanks to the Jiejian Bureau* and that would be that.

Feng Xiao sighed and turned to Cui Buqu. "I almost died defeating Xiao Lü; my soul was wandering before the gates of hell. And you still set me up? Cui Buqu, don't you feel the slightest guilt?"

Despite the traces of illness that lined his face, Cui Buqu's ex-pression was serene. He seemed to have sunk into deep slumber, a rare thing for him to come by. He even emitted a few gentle snores.

No matter how Feng Xiao thundered and roared, it was impossible to wake someone so determined to feign sleep.

Chapter 156

DARK CLOUDS LOOMED OVERHEAD, heavy enough to collapse the sky.

The willow branches had shed their green, leaving stark limbs jutting stiffly from the ground. The first snowflakes drifted gently down but found no purchase on the withered branches. Instead, they timidly fluttered to the ground, where they piled into sparse white drifts within the hollows between the roots, revealing patches of dark soil underneath.

A carriage rolled toward the city gate. At a command from its master, the driver slowed, and the rhythmic patter of the horse's hooves eased.

This carriage was in the center of a convoy, with riders both ahead and behind. As it came to a stop, the horses at its rear had no choice but to follow suit. Up ahead, their guide slowed and glanced back, puzzled by the change in pace. He was first to spot the hand that reached out from the carriage in an apparent attempt to catch the falling snowflakes. The action held the careful wonder of someone who'd traveled from the northern deserts to the capital of the Central Plains for the first time. Understanding dawned, and the guide raised a hand to signal the riders ahead to wait.

Within the carriage, the Göktürk prince Kuhezhen shifted his gaze from the straight back of their guide ahead to the bare willows and the city wall. Finally, his eyes came to rest on the bustling scene at the city gate, where horses and carts came and went. He looked ahead again, his disappointment apparent. "They say the drifting snow at the ancient Baqiao Bridge is one of the capital's most magnificent sights. I had no idea the first snowfall in the Central Plains arrived this late!"

The snowflakes melted almost as soon as they landed on the ground. The view was desolate. Where was the towering, snow-clad majesty of the northern empire's city walls?

Just that autumn, the Sui dynasty had succeeded in uniting the various powers that opposed Ishbara Khagan under its banner, then led them in a decisive battle against Ishbara's Göktürk army.

The Sui army had dispatched generals Gao Jiong and Yu Qingze along the roads from Ning and Yuan Provinces, encircling the main Göktürk forces. At the same time, the actions of Zhangsun Sheng, Yuan Hui, and Cui Buqu had intensified the internal strife within the Khaganate. In response to a formidable common enemy in Ishbara Khagan, the various Göktürk factions finally united, and tens of thousands from the Göktürk Suni tribe directly pledged loyalty to the Sui dynasty.

With the additional pressure from the Khitan in the east, Ishbara realized he stood to face an attack on three sides. He was compelled to submit to the Sui dynasty. Princess Qianjin, his wife and a descendant of the Yuwen clan of Northern Zhou, came before the Sui emperor and expressed her willingness to change her surname to Yang. Delighted by the gesture, the emperor bestowed upon her the title of Princess Dayi—*great righteousness*—in honor of her profound understanding of all that was good, and showered Ishbara with rewards of gold and silver.

Now the seventh prince of the Göktürks, Kuhezhen, had entered Sui to formally greet the emperor. Arriving with him were warhorses from the Western Regions, intended as their yearly tribute. Before he'd even set out, the emperor had

already declared the young prince a great pillar of the nation and conferred upon him the title of Duke of An, at the same time bestowing the surname Yang upon Princess Dayi and adding her to the family register.

Everyone knew these were nominal titles only. Even as a so-called pillar of the nation, the seventh prince could hardly participate in governance—though at least he didn't lack status. In reality, he was a hostage the Khaganate had sent to Sui.

Kuhezhen's carriage at last rolled into the capital with his entourage. He'd requested to travel by carriage rather than horseback the entire way from the desert to Daxing City. He wished to make a good impression on the emperor, he claimed, and maintaining his appearance and manners was more convenient this way. His guide not only had no objections, he privately thought this seventh prince rather astute. A tidy and compliant visitor who openly demonstrated his submission was much more appealing than a travelworn Göktürk appearing in dusty foreign garb.

Indeed, at that moment, the seventh prince Kuhezhen was wearing Han attire. Even his hair, normally braided in the traditional style of his tribe, had been pulled into a neat topknot. If not for his prominent nose and brow, he might have been indistinguishable from one of the capital's citizens. Missing, however, was the straight-backed posture of a Han scholar. His legs were leisurely crossed, as they would be in the royal yurt.

By the time he looked away from the window, the last traces of curiosity on his face had vanished.

"This is Chunming Gate. If the prince wishes to see Baqiao Bridge, he must head out of Yanxing Gate," said the man sitting beside him with his eyes closed.

He was ordinary in appearance, as inconspicuous as the roadside grass and stones when motionless. Yet the moment he spoke, the dull atmosphere in the carriage livened, and his face and brows grew mobile and spirited.

Had any martial arts master been present in that carriage, the transformation would have alarmed them—they would surely consider this man a formidable foe. But the seventh prince Kuhezhen had no reaction at all. He was a middling martial artist at best, insensitive to the subtle ebb and flow only experts could perceive. Moreover, he had known this man for years; he was used to him.

Kuhezhen let the carriage curtain fall. He'd lost interest in the capital's sights. "I thought the Sui capital would be bursting with talent, busy and vibrant. It's just a larger city with people in brighter clothing. I haven't spotted anyone particularly extraordinary. The people out there trying to squeeze through the gate are all commoners, not worth a second glance. Tu'an, what do you think?"

Tu'an Qinghe finally opened his eyes. "This is because the people Your Highness wishes to see are not here."

Kuhezhen smiled. "I heard the Sui dynasty is filled with the wise and gifted, that there are brilliant men everywhere. I hoped to meet them and exchange ideas; at least that way my trip to the Central Plains wouldn't be in vain."

"What qualifies a man as brilliant in your eyes, Your Highness?"

"There are many brilliant individuals in the world," Kuhezhen replied. "But I've met only a few. For instance, my father, Ishbara Khagan, and that Han envoy, Zhangsun Sheng."

Tu'an Qinghe frowned slightly, then offered up two more names. "The khatun? Yuxiu?"

He referred, of course, to Kuhezhen's father's wife: the empress of the Eastern Göktürk Khaganate, Princess Qianjin, now dubbed Princess Dayi. Princess Qianjin had left the royal family of Northern Zhou and married into a nation of wind and sand. Everyone had expected her to take after her predecessors. Too delicate to withstand the hardships beyond the border, such women grew bitter and melancholy, and ultimately passed away young. But Princess Qianjin did more than survive—when the Northern Zhou dynasty fell, she'd won her husband's heart and, with it, a share of the power within the Göktürk court. One had to admit she was exceptionally clever.

As for Yuxiu, the monk had been the princess's favorite subordinate. But she'd sent him to the Central Plains long ago, and Kuhezhen hadn't seen him since.

He shook his head. "Tu'an, there are many kinds of brilliance. Some are hailed as great minds yet seek only short-sighted gains, while others find their judgment impaired by their emotions. Princess Dayi is the former, while Yuxiu was the latter. I once had high hopes for that man. When someone like him enters the Central Plains, they're destined to stir up great storms. Yet he ultimately met with failure. Without the princess, he might have gone further."

Tu'an Qinghe nodded slightly in agreement. "Perhaps Your Highness has someone specific in mind."

"A truly brilliant individual possesses not only the wisdom to choose the opportune moment, but also a fair amount of good fortune," Kuhezhen replied. "From my perspective, both the current emperor and empress of Sui embody these traits. If their heir inherits these qualities, this dynasty could remain prosperous for at least three generations. If not—"

"If not?"

Kuhezhen smiled. "If not, no matter how many geniuses like Cui Buqu exist, it will make no difference."

Tu'an Qinghe considered him. "I thought Your Highness agreed to come thanks to Xiao Lü's invitation."

"Xiao Lü is also a brilliant man; alas, he's short on luck." Kuhezhen sighed. "If only he'd been born to a better fate. Think how different the world would look if he'd been born the son of the Southern dynasty's emperor."

Thus was Xiao Lü unlucky, and the Northern dynasty, brimming with talent of its own, stood in his way. The path before him was fraught with difficulties, and the fate that awaited him might be an ill one. If Kuhezhen were to cooperate with someone like that, his own luck might be affected.

"Tu'an, I never asked you. What made you decide to come with me to the Central Plains?"

"I've broken through my bottleneck." Tu'an Qinghe's expression was serene, as if the statement was of no consequence.

"That hurdle was one even the mightiest expert of the Göktürks, Hulugu, could not overcome." Kuhezhen's eyes shone with interest. "I remember you secluded yourself for three years back then, but this time it only took you three months."

Tu'an Qinghe nodded. "It went much smoother this time. The notes Hulugu left were a great boon to me."

Kuhezhen chuckled. "To me, Hulugu is just a legend. But I imagine you must now be much stronger than the previous expert my father favored, Fo'er. Tell me, if you were to duel with Fo'er, how long would it take you to defeat him?"

Tu'an Qinghe thought a moment. "Between three and five moves."

Surprise colored Kuhezhen's face. "I heard Feng Xiao expended no small effort to defeat Fo'er. Even if he, too, has improved since then, surely he won't stand a chance against you now."

"Not necessarily," Tu'an Qinghe admitted. "There are no limits to martial arts. Until I see him, I cannot be sure."

Kuhezhen smiled, the dark clouds of his disappointment at the scene outside the city gate dispersing at last. "The finest experts of our time—Yan Wushi, Yi Pichen, Ruyan Kehui, Shen Qiao, Guang Lingsan, Feng Xiao. None of them are in Daxing City. As vast as this capital is, few martial artists here can truly be called experts: no more than two or three. If you wish to spar with them, I fear you'll have to wait. In due time, the capital will descend into chaos. Many experts will emerge to attempt to turn the tide. But they likely won't compare to the grandmasters I just mentioned and aren't worth your intervention. Instead, we should observe patiently. Once the waters are sufficiently murky, we can give things another stir."

He raised the carriage curtain once more just as their guide turned his head. Their eyes met. Seeing Kuhezhen's expression, full of shy anticipation, their guide imagined this seventh prince must be a modest, approachable young man. Kuhezhen readily embraced this impression, looking back with a nod and a smile.

Yet by the time he lowered the curtain again, his posture and expression had transformed. If he had seemed lethargic, even petulant, just moments ago, now he was like a wolf excited by the scent of prey.

"Yuxiu is dead," he said. "The princess is furious in her grief—her hatred for Yang Jian has only intensified. The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai have already lost too many members; they are sure to bet everything on their next move. Tu'an, none of the other princes were willing to come to the Sui dynasty, but I'm different. The people of the Central Plains have a saying: Everything is ready save for a gust of the east wind.[1] I believe I am that east wind, the catalyst that sets everything in motion."

Kuhezhen's blue eyes darkened as if glimpsing the impending storm, a hint of bloodlust visible within his joy. "I spoke too soon: Daxing City deserves its reputation as a world-famous capital. The throngs of citizens and carriages flowing through its gates far surpass those of our royal court. If a storm were to come to such a great capital, it would surely be a sight more magnificent than the likes of you or I have ever seen."

***

The carriage rocked as it sped down the road, as if to lull its occupant to sleep.

But Cui Buqu was not asleep—in fact, the swaying made his head throb.

The grain embezzlement case had drawn to a close, at least for now. The Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus had arrested most of the relevant county officials, and the Ministry of Personnel had swiftly dispatched their own people to reassure the victims and distribute grain, a process that took nearly half a month. Cui Buqu's assistance was no longer required, but the flare-up of his old symptoms had prevented him from traveling. It was only several days after Rong Qing escorted the suspects to the capital that he finally set out himself.

Practically everyone in their group was a patient. Guan Shanhai had sustained serious injuries in battle, his condition even worse than Cui Buqu's. In the carriage behind them, the third chief of the Jiejian Bureau, Ming Yue, fared only marginally better. To avoid reopening their wounds riding, they traveled slowly by carriage with frequent stops to rest.

Qiao Xian had planned to escort them back to the capital before heading southwest to her new post, but Cui Buqu told her it wasn't needed. She departed in sorrow, embarking on her journey alone.

After all their time together, poor young Pei-langjun was at last forced to say goodbye. In the days that followed, his mind wandered so much even Ming Yue asked jokingly if his soul had left with Qiao Xian.

Despite it all, what truly troubled Cui Buqu was not the discomfort of the jostling carriage but rather…

Someone lifted the curtain and entered. His guest waited for no invitation but sat down unbidden, as if the carriage was his own home.

"My venerable legs are sore; I came in to rest."

There he went again. Cui Buqu sighed.

Chapter 157

HOW MANY TIMES now had Feng-er found some excuse to enter Cui Buqu's carriage? Three days ago, he said the sun was too bright and hurt his eyes. The day after that, he claimed he'd been sunburned. Yesterday…

If he could reverse time, Cui Buqu would never have given him those three ice-fungus pills.

"Your complexion is looking poor again. Is it another flare-up?" Feng Xiao said, expressing both surprise and concern. "Let me channel you some true qi."

Cui Buqu remained expressionless. "I appreciate your concern, but your third chief is in the carriage behind us. Why not check on him instead?"

"Ming Yue is a skilled martial artist," Feng Xiao replied with feeling. "If he takes time to practice self-healing, then he might just break through his plateau. I couldn't bear to stifle his growth. Cui-lang, you and I share a special relationship; there's no need to be coy."

Cui-lang?

What relationship did they share? And how was it that Cui Buqu knew nothing about it? Not to mention, the word *coy* wasn't even in Cui Buqu's vocabulary. He cast his eyes to the sky in wordless frustration.

Unfortunately, he was sitting in a carriage—the sky wasn't visible. The best he could do was stare at the carriage's roof. Yet before he could say a word, Feng-er seized his wrist and half forced true qi into him. Cui Buqu struggled but failed to break free.

The true qi threaded its way into his body, penetrating his veins and warming him more effectively than even his hand stove. The continuous influx of spiritual energy he'd enjoyed recently *had* alleviated many of his chronic symptoms. At this time of year, as the weather turned colder, he commonly endured some form of pain almost every other day. Yet since the incident in Guangqian County, he hadn't experienced a single relapse. Feng-er's true qi played a vital role in this.

However—

"Tsk…"

While warm, the true qi coursing through him writhed like a mass of snakes, chaotic and unruly as it moved through his body as it pleased. Wherever it traveled, scorching heat followed. After just a few moments, it was as if his ice-cold body had been plunged into a scalding hot spring; his hair stood on end. Even Cui Buqu's iron will couldn't prevent the furrow that creased his brow, nor the low groan that escaped his lips.

He bit his tongue, trying hard to swallow the sound and not make another.

"If it's uncomfortable, feel free to cry out. Don't hold back for my sake," Feng Xiao said warmly, his lips brushing Cui Buqu's ear.

Cui Buqu rolled his eyes. Of course Feng-er was doing this on purpose.

Just because he'd taken the chance to order Qin Miaoyu to impersonate Feng Xiao while he was in seclusion, potentially landing the Jiejian Bureau in hot water…

In the end, he hadn't managed to make the Jiejian Bureau his scapegoat; the matter was resolved, and he had a new achievement under his belt. Since he'd managed to drag the Jiejian Bureau in, they'd enjoyed part of the credit. Yet Feng-er refused to let it go; he was determined to collect on this debt, bit by bit.

But Feng Xiao really *was* helping him heal. Cui Buqu swallowed his complaints and sighed. His mistake had been stopping Xiao Lü during the tavern incident—a fleeting moment of weakness. If he hadn't, perhaps Xiao Lü and Feng Xiao might have killed each other, and he'd be enjoying peace and quiet by now.

Despite Cui Buqu's stoic forbearance, Feng Xiao didn't take his revenge any further. He completed the transfer of true qi without any trickery, then gently urged Cui Buqu to rest as he lifted the curtain to exit the carriage. Two suspicious spots of color had appeared on his cheeks.

Cui Buqu heard Pei Jingzhe outside. "My lord, why is your face so red?"

Feh. Because he was holding his breath, Cui Buqu thought to himself.

Feng Xiao sighed gustily. "Your lord has only himself to blame for being too outstandingly handsome, unrivaled in appearance."

Cui Buqu was silent. Feng Xiao's suggestive tone would make anyone's imagination run wild.

Sure enough, Pei Jingzhe took the bait. Hesitant, he said, "Chief Cui doesn't seem like the type to—"

"He's a deceiver," Feng Xiao replied with disdain. "How often does he say one thing and mean another?"

He was talking about transferring true qi, but anyone might be forgiven for assuming he meant something else entirely.

Pei Jingzhe's shocked gasp drifted in through the curtain. Cui Buqu's face remained expressionless, his heart like still water.

After all this time, many had begun to suspect that there was more to the relationship between Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao than met the eye. Feng-er was only too happy to take advantage of this misunderstanding to further mislead them. That was just how vengeful a creature this oleander spirit was. Cui Buqu should have been used to it by now.

One misstep was prelude to countless regrets.

Vexed, Cui Buqu gazed down at his wrist, where warmth seemed to linger. What demon had bewitched him into giving away those three ice-fungus pills? And without the slightest hesitation?

The remainder of the morning drifted past without incident. Feng Xiao seemed to sense Cui Buqu's poor mood and did not come in again to tease him.

The carriage came to a stop in a small town several dozen miles from Luoyang, where they planned to take a brief rest before setting off again, hoping to reach Luoyang before dark.

Cui Buqu's body was sore from sitting so long. He was just preparing to alight and stretch his legs when someone tugged at his arm.

"There's a yellow weasel up ahead," said Feng Xiao. "You should stay inside."

Cui Buqu said nothing. He, too, saw the yellow-clad woman seated comfortably inside the teahouse. He looked at Feng Xiao. "You consider me the chicken?"[2]

Feng Xiao arched a brow. "Of course not. You're—"

The two stared at each other. Feng Xiao quickly corrected himself. “You’re the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, Cui-lang. Did you lose your memory along with your health? Come, go in and rest. I’ll have Pei Jingzhe brew you some tea.”

Cui Buqu attempted to yank his hand away but couldn’t break free. After a few tries, he gave up. “I’ve just glimpsed an old friend. Of course I’ll go and greet her.” He sighed. “Besides, she’s not here for me.”

“How do you know?”

“Let’s make a bet.”

Feng Xiao’s interest was instantly piqued. “What bet?”

“If I win,” Cui Buqu said deliberately, “you’ll refrain from speaking until we reach the capital.” He merely wished to quietly admire that face without being subjected to the chatter of its owner.

“And if I win?”

“You decide.”

“Once you return to the capital, report to the empress and cancel your engagement to Duchess Yuwen.”

“We’re not engaged,” Cui Buqu said with a frown.

Feng Xiao scoffed. “I refuse to believe you haven’t heard the rumors during our time away from the capital. The news that the empress is set on arranging your marriage is everywhere. She’s even prepared the decree; it’s only a matter of time.”

Cui Buqu cast Feng Xiao a meaningful glance. “Feng-er,” he said, his mouth halfway to a smile. “Aren’t you a little too concerned with my personal life?”

Leaning closer, Feng Xiao whispered, “You took incredible advantage of me after the battle at the tavern that night. Both Ming Yue and Qin Miaoyu saw. And just now, when I healed you, you took yet another small liberty. Your features are too harsh; you’re not a worthy match for me. But think—if word got out that the mighty chief of the Zuoyue Bureau exploited someone and fled without taking responsibility, would it not be a stain on your reputation?”

“How do you manage to speak such shameful words so boldly?” Cui Buqu asked, entirely sincere.

“I learned from you of course.”

Cui Buqu sneered and patted Feng Xiao’s cheek. “A gentleman’s word is his bond; our bet has been made. After you, Deputy Chief Feng.”

Feng Xiao turned his head just so, the angle perfectly calculated so that his lips grazed Cui Buqu’s palm. Anyone who saw would think Cui Buqu was making improper advances toward him. Pei Jingzhe, who had just glanced over, gasped involuntarily. His mind raced as he remembered Feng Xiao’s earlier claims.

Truly, a shameless person is the most invincible of all, Cui Buqu reflected.

Bing Xian, clad in yellow, was facing away from them, yet she seemed to have eyes on the back of her head. She turned just as they approached, rising and offering them a bright smile. The expression wasn’t dazzling but refreshing, like a spring breeze.

“Cui-langjun, Deputy Chief Feng. It’s been a while; I hope you’ve been well.”

Feng Xiao scoffed inwardly. Him she addressed as Deputy Chief Feng, but Cui Buqu was Cui-langjun—the difference was stark. *Don't think I didn't catch that.*

Bing Xian was a prominent disciple from the Hehuan Sect—and like Feng Xiao, she was a demonic practitioner. Alas, followers of the demonic path had never observed any tradition of fellowship. Running into other practitioners instead most commonly resulted in an atmosphere of animosity and competition.

In contrast to Feng Xiao's chilly regard, Cui Buqu was unfailingly polite. "Bing Xian-guniang[3] has only grown more charming."

"Really?" Bing Xian touched her own cheek, delighted.

Don't tell me she believes that kind of compliment. Foolish woman, thought Feng Xiao.

"I didn't expect Bing Xian-guniang to be so informed as to anticipate our passage through this area. You've even"—Cui Buqu glanced at the half-empty cup of tea on the table, then continued meaningfully—"been waiting here some time. I assume you have something important to discuss?"

Bing Xian smiled. "You misunderstand. A few days ago, a minor swordsmanship contest in Songshan concluded. My sect sent me to join in on the excitement, and my journey took me through Luoyang. There, I heard Cui-langjun has eradicated the forces of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai almost completely, including the formidable Yuxiu. This news has spread across the jianghu. Congratulations on your victory, Cui-langjun. You've restored peace to the land."

This is the first time I've heard a demonic practitioner say something like "restored peace to the land." Does this woman not find her own words absurd? huffed Feng Xiao. Moreover, *he'd* been the one to kill Yuxiu. Why was she congratulating Cui Buqu? Wasn't she baldly stating that she'd sought him out specifically?

Bing Xian seemed to register that she had neglected the aloof Deputy Chief Feng. "My humble self sensed Deputy Chief Feng's sharpened control over his spirit. Your martial arts must have taken a great leap forward. This too is worthy of congratulations."

"Since Yuan Xiuxiu, Hehuan Sect has failed to produce anyone of note. You all need to work harder," Feng Xiao said coldly.

Bing Xian had roughly deduced Feng Xiao's background from observing his skills during their previous encounter. After returning to her sect, it had been a simple thing to discover Feng Xiao's identity. Demonic practitioners cared nothing for one's origins or seniority; they acknowledged strength alone. Bing Xian knew that even if there were ten of her, her strength wouldn't compare to that of a single Feng Xiao. Thus, if his comment offended her, she didn't let it show; she nodded affably in agreement. "Thank you for your guidance, Deputy Chief Feng. I shall strive to improve."

She smiled again at Cui Buqu. "But our encounter here is a fateful one. I shall take the chance to inform Cui-langjun of two matters."

"Please go on," said Cui Buqu.

The three of them took their seats, while Pei Jingzhe went to ask the shopkeeper for tea and snacks. The teahouse was spacious, and before long, Ming Yue and Qin Miaoyu had also settled next to them. The atmosphere was perfect for

conversation.

"The swordsmanship contest in Songshan was a relatively small affair," Bing Xian began. "No one from Liuli Palace of Fangzhang Isle was present. Still, quite a few rising stars and reclusive masters of the jianghu were in attendance. Among them was a man I'd never heard of, yet his performance was brilliant. He defeated numerous contestants, and not only were his martial arts exceptional, they were unique. Uncanny and clever, backed by profound internal cultivation. In my opinion…"

Bing Xian had been calm and composed as long as they'd known her, but at this point, she hesitated and cast a glance at Feng Xiao. "He'd likely rank within the strongest ten in all the land," she continued. "Possibly even the top three."

Feng Xiao cocked a brow. "You think the world's strongest ten are like cabbages you can find anywhere?"

Bing Xian's smile was stiff. "I don't wish to overstate his skill, but the facts were right in front of me. To our shame, Hehuan Sect has been in decline since the days of Yuan Xiuxiu and Sang Jingxing. In an effort to revitalize our sect, I was tasked with scouting for new talent. But the background of this individual remains a mystery; I have no idea when the Central Plains produced such an expert. I've long heard Cui-langjun has a deep understanding of the various sects and factions. I am taking the liberty of seeking his guidance."

"What was this man's name?"

"His name was Tu'an. Tu'an Qinghe."

Chapter 158

"I'VE NEVER HEARD this name."

After rifling through his memory, Cui Buqu had come up completely empty.

He had reviewed all the martial arts rankings Fan Yun had brought back from Liuli Palace. Cui Buqu had an eidetic memory; if this person's name had appeared on the rankings, he would remember it. Assuming he was truly as exceptional a martial artist as Bing Xian claimed, only two options remained.

"It's possible he's never shown himself in the jianghu," Cui Buqu mused. "Liuli Palace can't record his name and achievements if they've never heard of him."

For instance, Feng Xiao, though a remarkable martial artist, had never participated in swordsmanship contests and rarely crossed paths with other martial experts of the jianghu. If Liuli Palace wished to rank his skill, they could only evaluate the testimony of others who'd faced him in combat. If Feng Xiao's opponents, too, were unknown in the jianghu, it would be impossible to accurately place him.

Regardless, he'd single-handedly defeated a dozen experts during the tavern altercation, including the young leader of the Jinhuan Guild. It was only a matter of time before he carved a space for himself in the martial arts world—not that he put much value on such rankings.

But this wasn't Cui Buqu's concern at the moment.

"There's a second possibility," he continued.

Just as Feng Xiao opened his mouth to speak, Bing Xian interjected: "He might have used an alias."

Feng Xiao was confounded. This woman seemed to be deliberately stealing his lines.

Cui Buqu nodded confirmation. Bing Xian couldn't help smiling. "It seems Cui-langjun and I had the same thought. But there was something else I observed—this man appeared unfamiliar with the rules of the jianghu and even common Han etiquette. It's unlikely he'd adopt a false name. And here's another thing: His martial arts techniques were reminiscent of Hulugu, the great master of the Western Regions."

"Hulugu had several notable disciples in his time," Cui Buqu replied. "Kunye, Duan Wenyang, and Qin Shuanghan. His other disciples never set foot in the Central Plains, nor did they gain any particular fame in the Western Regions. I couldn't tell you their names."

In fact, he wasn't disclosing all he knew. Cui Buqu, too, had received the news that the Göktürks had pledged allegiance to the Sui dynasty, and that the seventh prince Kuhezhen was on his way with a tribute of Göktürk treasures, ready to serve the emperor. What were the odds that a Göktürk prince had arrived within the Central Plains just as an expert mimicking Hulugu's style appeared from the Western Regions? It was too much of a coincidence—there was surely some connection between the two.

News of the Göktürk prince's arrival must have reached Luoyang, but Bing Xian either hadn't connected the dots or was pretending she hadn't. She nodded. "It seems his identity will remain a mystery," she said with a sigh. "If Cui-langjun uncovers any further leads, could I trouble you to send someone to notify the Hehuan Sect?"

Feng Xiao sneered to himself. With Sui replacing Zhou, the Hehuan Sect's influence within the court had dwindled significantly. This woman was making a transparent attempt to latch onto the Zuoyue Bureau in hopes of getting a new foothold. He cleared his throat noisily, reminding Cui Buqu not to be deceived by the weasel.

Cui Buqu pretended not to hear. "Certainly. However, you've always taken the initiative to come to us. Does the Hehuan Sect have a residence in the capital where we may contact you?"

If such a residence existed, it wouldn't be public knowledge. Still, if Cui Buqu wanted to know, the Zuoyue Bureau could find out even if Bing Xian refused to tell him. She was clever enough not to wait for Cui Buqu to press her and promptly confessed the address. "We do, but it's seldom occupied. Our disciples only use it when they have affairs to see to in the capital. You'll find it in Anyi Ward, the last house on the right at the end of the alley."

Her message was clear: The Zuoyue Bureau was welcome to investigate if they wished.

Pleased with her willingness to cooperate, Cui Buqu softened his tone. "I find I get along very well with Bing Xian-guniang, and so many fateful encounters have brought us together. If you're in no hurry, why not share a meal with us here before setting off?"

Feng Xiao was speechless. They'd agreed not to linger here and to head straight to Luoyang. Yet the moment Cui Buqu realized he could extract more information from this woman, he'd changed their plans without consulting anyone.

As if sensing Feng Xiao's displeasure, Cui Buqu turned to him. "If Deputy Chief Feng has urgent matters to attend to, there's no need to wait," he said in tones of great understanding. "Please set off without us."

Feng Xiao's mouth twitched. Was Cui Buqu trying to get rid of him? *No chance.*

His smile failed to reach his eyes. "I also wish to hear Bing Xian-guniang's account of Songshan's swordsmanship contest. How unfortunate I wasn't able to attend, though my heart yearned to."

Bing Xian frowned. "Thank you for your kindness, Cui-langjun. But there's something more I must tell you both. Just yesterday, as I was leaving Luoyang, I heard there was a massacre at Yandang Mountain Estate. The Lin family of Luoyang had over fifty members, yet they all perished in a single night."

Cui Buqu's gaze sharpened.

Yandang Mountain Estate was inside Luoyang, and their young leader was the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai's Qi-xiansheng, Lin Yong. Back at Mount Tiannan, Lin Yong had been the only high-ranking member they'd captured alive. The seventh director had been brought back to the Zuoyue Bureau, where he had provided a considerable amount of information under interrogation. But Lin Yong was only

responsible for the Thirteen Floors' northern trade routes; he wasn't one of Xiao Lü's confidants. He knew very little compared to someone like Fan Yun. Seeing that they wouldn't get anything more out of him, Cui Buqu had detained him at the Zuoyue Bureau, waiting for an opportunity to make use of him.

Now, his first thought was that Xiao Lü had killed the Lin family to silence Lin Yong. But he quickly rejected this notion—as far as he knew, Lin Yong had acted without his father's knowledge. If Xiao Lü wished to use Lin Yong's family to threaten him into silence, he wouldn't have killed them all. Doing so would only push Lin Yong to join his enemies.

But if the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai weren't responsible, who was?

Cui Buqu exchanged a glance with Feng Xiao, then gave a slight shake of his head.

"The massacre has nothing to do with the Hehuan Sect. Why tell us this?" Feng Xiao asked Bing Xian.

"The officials in Luoyang are preparing to seal off the Lin manor. As the swordsmanship contest had just concluded, a few of us were invited to act as witnesses and lend our assistance. The circumstances are extremely strange—as far as we could tell, there was no outside killer. Over fifty people of the estate turned on one another: husbands against wives, masters attacking servants. A few even inflicted dozens of wounds on their own bodies and bled to death. By the time we arrived, not a single survivor remained at Yandang Mountain Estate. There are few martial techniques within the jianghu that can drive men to lose their minds and harm themselves. The demonic sects have one, for instance."

"Demonic Persuasion," Feng Xiao supplied.

"Correct," said Bing Xian. "This technique is known to all members of the three demonic sects. This is partially why I wanted to tell both of you about this matter in advance. The Hehuan Sect has no grievances, old or new, with Yandang Mountain Estate; there's no reason for us to have slaughtered the family."

"Taking the initiative to tell us won't convince us of your innocence." Feng Xiao's smile was all teeth. "Surely you know that, sometimes, the more eager one is to speak, the more suspicious it seems. Earlier you mentioned you were merely passing through, but it's clear you planned this encounter in advance. You waited here knowing we were on our way to Luoyang."

Bing Xian sighed. "I'll be honest. Cui-langjun's investigation into the grain embezzlement in Guangqian caused quite a commotion—everyone in the county heard about it. One of our disciples happened to be nearby, and it only took a few inquiries to discover when you were planning to leave. I suspected you'd both be passing through Luoyang in the next few days. Yes, I was waiting here, but I meant no harm. If Deputy Chief Feng doubts my intentions, I'm happy to return to Luoyang with you to prove my innocence."

There was a moment's pause. "I believe you," said Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao's expression darkened.

"That is, I believe that you weren't deliberately tracking us," Cui Buqu continued. "But whether you are innocent of the rest is still up for debate."

The furrow between Feng Xiao's brows eased slightly.

Bing Xian rose and straightened her clothes. “Thank you for your understanding; I truly do appreciate it. This case has no connection to the Hehuan Sect; I only wished to clarify any misunderstandings before they occurred. I hope the two gentlemen will uncover the truth and prove our innocence.”

Bing Xian was painfully aware that the Hehuan Sect couldn’t afford any scandals. If her sect was judged to have committed mass murder, the combined might of the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus could easily crush what little influence they still had in the Northern dynasty. The Hehuan Sect was already facing significant challenges; an accusation like this could very well be the nail in the coffin.

But any further explanations would be in vain; until the truth had been determined, Cui Buqu would make no promises.

At this point, the group could delay no longer. They immediately returned to the road, heading for Luoyang.

Bing Xian rode a little distance behind them, while Deputy Chief Feng stepped into Cui Buqu’s carriage yet again. Cui Buqu didn’t drive him away—for once, Feng-er’s expression was serious. He hadn’t come to play around.

“After you detained Lin Yong at the Zuoyue Bureau, I discreetly assigned people to monitor Yandang Mountain Estate. How could something of this magnitude occur while I’ve been blissfully unaware?”

The Jiejian Bureau’s surveillance network was expansive; its reach included even remote border towns like Liugong City, let alone a major metropolis like Luoyang. Even if Feng Xiao had been at the ends of the earth, any such development should have reached him swiftly through specialized channels.

The Zuoyue Bureau couldn’t match the Jiejian Bureau when it came to the sheer scale of their operation, but Feng Xiao was certain that Cui Buqu, prudent as he was, had placed similar surveillance on Yandang Mountain Estate. Yet during their journey, neither of them had received so much as a hint of this news.

Their eyes met as a single possibility unfurled in both their minds: It wasn’t just the family that had died. Everyone monitoring the estate was dead too.

Chapter 159

JACKDAWS CROAKED, clinging to bare branches whipped by the wind. Over the heads of the long-neglected stone lions guarding the gates of the Lin estate, two lanterns clanged against the beams. The copper knockers rattled accompaniment, sending up a clamor that joined the wind's eerie howl.

The ghosts are knocking.

The words drifted through Pei Jingzhe's mind just as another chill gust whistled past, setting the lantern in his hand swaying.

The candle went out.

Pei Jingzhe took a breath. To be here in the dead of night with looming shadows as their only companion… It was enough to give anyone gooseflesh. He peered around Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu and looked through the gates.

More than fifty people at Yandang Mountain Estate had perished. The city's mortuary couldn't hold all the bodies, which had been temporarily laid out in the estate's courtyard. The corpses were arranged in neat rows, heads aligned with heads, feet with feet. Their faces were the white of death, and streaks of blood had stiffened into patches of dark brown. As he looked down the rows, Pei Jingzhe saw that some had died with their eyes wide open.

Pei Jingzhe considered himself well-acquainted with death. He'd seen his fair share and taken no few lives himself. Yet as he witnessed this scene, cold fear wrapped itself around his heart.

He instinctively quickened his pace to catch up with Feng Xiao and glanced at Cui Buqu.

The Zuoyue chief had squatted down, his hand stretched toward a corpse—the most mutilated one at that. Half its neck was missing, and mangled flesh splayed grotesquely around the wound. One eyeball had fallen out, tethered to its skull by only a thin strand of nerve as it dangled over the corpse's face.

Unfazed, Cui Buqu gently nudged the eyeball back into its socket.

Pei Jingzhe almost fell to his knees before Cui Buqu on the spot. He looked toward Feng Xiao.

Of course Deputy Chief Feng would never dirty his own hands. He held his sleeve over his nose and picked his way around the bloodstains on the ground. Eventually he pointed out a corpse to Qin Miaoyu, who did all the work as he hovered nearby, giving instructions. "Unfasten his upper garment; I want to see if there are any wounds on his torso. Yes, unfasten it completely. Loosen the belt as well. Check the abdomen and genitals!"

Qin Miaoyu, whose face was as lovely as a flower, sweated profusely as she turned the corpse this way and that. Pei Jingzhe felt a flicker of sympathy.

Feng Xiao shot him a look.

Pei Jingzhe blinked. In a commendable display of self-awareness, he scampered over to lend a hand.

Upon arriving in Luoyang, they'd first sought out the local officials and declared their identities, though they declined the county magistrate's enthusiastic attempts to accommodate them. They requested only the presence of two constables and a coroner familiar with the case while they examined the crime scene.

The wind howled again, funneling through the gaps in the doors and windows and tugging at the corpses' clothes. The freezing temperatures had kept the bodies from decaying. Every one of them lay frozen stiff, frost furring their temples and creeping along their eyelids. They looked as if they might rise up as zombies at any moment.

Cui Buqu brushed his fingers over the open eyes of an elderly man, drawing them shut.

After a moment, the corpse's eyes slowly opened once more. Cui Buqu closed them. They opened again. He closed them again, and again they opened.

Everyone stared.

The corners of Feng Xiao's mouth twitched. "All right, take a break. Stop working so hard."

"Such a terrible crime!" the old coroner said with a sigh. "Just terrible, terrible! My humble self has examined a lifetime of corpses, but I've never seen anything so cruel. An entire family massacred: servants, women, children—none of them spared! It's a horrible tragedy."

The Lin family had been a prominent one in Luoyang for generations. Lin Yong was the only son of the estate master, Lin Ling. The elderly Lin couple had no other children, and Lin Yong had yet to marry or take any concubines—this son was all they had. After he'd been detained by the Zuoyue Bureau, Lin Ling and his wife had run themselves ragged pleading for his release, but they had ultimately been forced to return empty-handed.

The Lin clan of Luoyang were martial artists, though the skills they passed down were mediocre at best. Even so, Lin Ling had made many friends in his business dealings and was a well-connected man. He wasn't the type to collect mortal enemies. If he'd accrued any grudges, they were more likely the result of business conflicts and unlikely to escalate to murder, let alone the massacre of an entire household.

This seemed to leave Lin Yong as the only variable.

Of course, it was not impossible Lin Ling himself had had questionable dealings or possessed critical information of the sort that would lead someone to silence him. But the leader of Yandang Mountain Estate had perished, so they couldn't ask him, and Lin Yong was currently held by the Zuoyue Bureau, too far away to summon for immediate questioning. All they could do was examine the victims and attempt to track down the murderer based on what evidence they gleaned.

A total of fifty-four corpses had been discovered, including Lin Ling, his wife, and the estate's staff. Also among the deceased were two undercover agents who'd been posing as servants: one from the Jiejian Bureau, and another from the Zuoyue Bureau. All of them had perished, without exception.

Pei Jingzhe approached the body of the Jiejian Bureau agent. In addition to the more obvious fatal wounds, ragged scratches, as from someone's nails, were etched into the man's flesh.

The marks were deep, as if inflicted with his assailant's entire strength; a layer of flesh had been completely removed. The attack had been relentless and without mercy—the mastermind hadn't only aimed to kill his victims but to torture them as well. Who had such intense loathing for the estate's residents?

Pei Jingzhe lifted one of the agent's hands and saw something black and sticky beneath his nails. A bit of flesh clung to one of his fingers, evidently ripped off his attacker. A horrific image of his colleagues clawing and biting each other in their final moments rose in his mind.

"All the people from Yandang Mountain Estate are here?" asked Pei Jingzhe. "No one is missing?"

"They're all here!" replied the young constable who had accompanied them. "I was on duty at the magistrate's office yesterday morning when someone came to report a murder. I informed my superiors and rushed over with some men right away —"

"So you were the first to discover the bodies?" Pei Jingzhe cut in. "Who reported it? Have you detained them?"

"Yes, yes," the constable replied. "The one who reported it is a man named Zheng. He's been delivering vegetables to Yandang Mountain Estate for over twenty years. Everyone around here knows him! Lao-Zheng goes to the back door of the estate every day at dawn to deliver fresh vegetables to the kitchen. But when he arrived yesterday, he knocked for a long time, but no one answered. So he pushed the door open and looked inside."

According to Old Zheng, the weather was cold and the wind was strong, so he hadn't smelled the blood. On first entering, the kitchen seemed totally empty. He continued until he stumbled upon three bodies; his legs nearly gave out in fright. Worried the murderer might still be inside, he didn't dare cry for help. He scrambled back outside and rushed to the county office to report the incident.

Yandang Mountain Estate was in a remote area, but still within the city limits. As soon as the county magistrate heard how grave the situation was, he instructed Constable Song to take everyone from the office and set out at once.

Nothing had prepared them for the scene they found. It wasn't just the three bodies Old Zheng had discovered. Corpses were strewn everywhere. Everyone in the estate had been killed, including the estate master and his wife, who were found dead outside their bedroom.

When the constable finished his tale, the coroner picked up where he'd left off. He'd been part of the second group to arrive.

After witnessing the sheer scale of the crime scene, the constable had sent a runner back to summon him and ask for further instructions. He'd examined the bodies and determined they'd been dead for at least two hours. Lin Ling was a martial artist, and while the family's Yandang Thirteen Styles weren't exactly famous within the jianghu, Lin Ling's skills were certainly beyond what any petty robbers could handle. On top of that, the estate had over a dozen guards.

"This is the estate master." Constable Song pointed to a middle-aged man laid out in one of the rows. "By the time we found him, Madam Lin and her two maids were already dead, stabbed through the heart with the master's own sword. Estate Master Lin then turned the blade on himself. When we arrived, he was breathing his last."

Constable Song had rushed to ask him about the murderer, but it was as if Lin Ling couldn't see him at all. His eyes had been wide open, face contorted as he stared into the empty space before him. Horrifyingly, he'd been smiling.

"Smiling?" Pei Jingzhe asked, baffled.

Constable Song nodded, obviously still shaken. "A chilling smile. When I asked him about the murderer, he didn't respond. 'So beautiful,' he kept saying. He muttered it several times before he passed away."

"Could it be a person's name? *So beautiful*—Hao Mei?" Pei Jingzhe looked to Bing Xian, who had followed them to the estate. "Bing Xian-guniang. I don't suppose there was anyone at the contest by that name?"

Bing Xian thought for a moment. "Not that I know of."

"If that were the name of the murderer," Cui Buqu said, "Lin Ling wouldn't have been smiling. He was likely hallucinating; who knows what he was seeing? Perhaps it was some beautiful illusion."

"There's an issue here," Feng Xiao interjected. "Even if the murderer was a demonic practitioner using some version of Demonic Persuasion, controlling such a large number of people would require profound inner cultivation. Even the most skilled masters would have trouble dominating so many minds at once, and anyone trained in martial arts would be likely to break free and flee. To take control of more than fifty people, they must have done more than just modulate their voice with internal energy to compel obedience. They must have used some external aid."

Pei Jingzhe looked puzzled, but Cui Buqu saw at once where he was going: "The food."

Everyone in the estate, down to their very own undercover agents, collected their daily meals from the kitchen. Food prepared there was the one thing everyone, from the master to the servants, came in contact with.

Understanding at once, Qin Miaoyu rushed to the kitchen.

Feng Xiao sidled up to Cui Buqu and nudged him with an elbow. "How many men did the Zuoyue Bureau plant here?"

Cui Buqu shot him a glance. "Two."

"There were two from the Jiejian Bureau as well."

But there'd been only one corpse each from the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus. Two men were missing.

Perhaps their agents had realized something was amiss and escaped before the tragedy. Or perhaps they'd gone after the murderer. In any case, seeing as they'd yet to make an appearance, they had likely met with disaster.

Feng Xiao turned to Constable Song. "Go ask the nearby villages if they heard anything unusual last night. Check with the night watchmen as well." He turned to Pei Jingzhe next: "Fetch me a basin of clean water."

Befuddled, Pei Jingzhe went off for the water. Qin Miaoyu passed him as she returned, an odd expression on her face.

"Chief, Cui-xiansheng. The kitchen is empty."

It wasn't just leftovers from the estate's last meal that had gone missing. Other staples and surplus ingredients, even the firewood for cooking—all of it was gone.

No wealthy household would lack such things; someone had taken them.

Far from clearing the case up, their investigation had only made it murkier. The murderer's motives were unknown, their methods brutal, and they'd left no trace. When it came to controlling people with sound, the demonic practitioners of the Fajing Sect were unrivaled. As sect leader, Feng Xiao's own skills in this art were not unimpressive, yet even he was at a loss.

Pei Jingzhe returned with the water, and Feng Xiao gestured for Cui Buqu to wash his hands. He hadn't missed Cui Buqu pressing that corpse's eye back into its socket.

Cui Buqu knew Feng Xiao was recalling the corpse he'd examined on their previous adventures, as well as how he'd made a point of touching Feng Xiao afterward to antagonize him. He must have been terrified of a repeat. Cui Buqu scoffed to himself—but he washed his hands clean in the basin.

Catching the charged glances between the two, Pei Jingzhe looked to Qin Miaoyu, as if hoping she would give him a hint.

Qin Miaoyu looked here and there; anywhere but at Pei Jingzhe.

The old coroner had mostly finished examining the bodies; at this point, there was nothing more to be learned. Meanwhile, Bing Xian wandered around the estate, and Feng Xiao made no move to stop her.

The name *Yandang Mountain Estate* brought to mind a grand mountain villa, but in truth, the estate was merely a large residence near the mountains in Luoyang. Moving quickly, Bing Xian flitted from the front to the back yard and arrived outside the Lin couple's quarters in a blink.

The door was wide open, revealing blood splattered across the floor and walls. Bing Xian was unbothered as she stepped through the mess, pacing around both the inside and outside of the house until she found what she was looking for on a table in the inner room: a bowl of lotus seed and lily soup, partially eaten.

Qin Miaoyu had been unable to find anything in the kitchen, yet here sat a cold bowl of soup. Madam Lin had most likely been in the middle of drinking it when the massacre began.

Bing Xian picked up the bowl and sniffed, but didn't detect anything suspicious. She lifted her nose from the bowl. There was a faint fragrance within the room, not incense but something else.

"It's aromatic cypress." Cui Buqu stepped through the door just in time to see her sniffing one of the wooden pillars supporting the walls. "All the wood here is aromatic cypress, hence the strong fragrance."

Bing Xian was confused. "As far as I know, Luoyang doesn't produce aromatic cypress."

"You're correct," said Cui Buqu. "They must have imported this wood from the southwest."

Bing Xian sighed. "A wealthy family, these Lins!"

Indeed, it was their wealth that had allowed them to serve as the treasury for the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai in the north.

Qin Miaoyu, arriving a few steps behind Cui Buqu, caught the end of this friendly exchange. She glanced at Pei Jingzhe, who was wandering the courtyard

oblivious, and hesitated. Should she intervene?

A glimpse of Feng Xiao's approaching figure solidified her decision. She slipped smoothly between Bing Xian and Cui Buqu. "Cui-xiansheng, I'm worried I missed something in the kitchen. Why don't you take a look as well? I'd feel more at ease with your eyes on it."

Cui Buqu nodded, completely unsuspecting. "Take this bowl of lotus seed and lily soup back for further investigation."

Qin Miaoyu smiled brightly and took the bowl from Bing Xian.

The group circled the estate once more but made no new discoveries.

"My lords," Constable Song began, a bit awkward. "How should we deal with these corpses? They'll start decomposing in a couple of days."

"If it stays this cold, they'll keep for another day or two. If we don't discover anything more within that time, give them all proper burials."

"Yes sir," the constable agreed.

Since encountering Bing Xian, they'd been working nonstop, first traveling, then investigating the scene of the crime. By now it was well past midnight. The wind was biting, the dew heavy. Despite wearing several layers, Cui Buqu was thoroughly chilled; one cough followed another, harsh and loud in the lifeless estate.

Feng Xiao yawned. "Look how late it's gotten; it's time I went back to rest. Think how my complexion will suffer in the morning."

Cui Buqu's lips twitched as he resisted the urge to mock Feng Xiao—he knew Feng Xiao had said it for his benefit.

Seeing that remaining would yield no further discoveries, Cui Buqu climbed into the carriage, then pulled back the curtain to peer out. "Please join me, Bing Xian-guniang. I wish to speak with you."

Pei Jingzhe had been listening to the howling wind so long he'd grown jumpy. The instant he heard they were going back, relief swelled in him. He thought of the warm soup and hot water waiting at the relay station and felt his spirits lift.

Thus he was completely blindsided by Feng Xiao's next remark: "Double Qin Miaoyu's salary for this month. Reduce Pei Jingzhe's by one-tenth."

Chapter 160

BING XIAN KNELT GRACEFULLY within the carriage.

She was no stunning beauty, but she was serene and elegant, her refined bearing more than compensating for anything her features lacked. Those who encountered her were often captivated by her presence long before noticing her face.

In truth, this was the fruit of Bing Xian's training in the Hehuan Sect's arts. She understood her strengths lay not in physical beauty, but rather in her graceful demeanor, enchanting voice, and the way her every smile or frown exuded a calculated charm. This was not the kind of beauty a person was born with, but the type honed through careful practice.

Over the past few years, she'd traveled to every corner of the land and met countless people from all walks of life, from nobles to commoners. Outside of the few top-class experts, she could sway the hearts of anyone with the skills she'd cultivated.

Cui Buqu was a glaring exception.

This was true even now. Bing Xian's movements looked ordinary, but in fact, every shift of her hand and glance of her eyes were laced with the Hehuan Sect's charm techniques. Yet Cui Buqu, despite not knowing a lick of martial arts, remained composed and clear-eyed, utterly unaffected.

Bing Xian sighed. Had Cui Buqu been born with a heart of stone?

She had a long way to go in her martial arts, but even so, she'd never felt deficient when facing peerless experts far above her. She knew precisely how wide the gap between them lay, as well as how to leverage her strengths to compensate for her shortcomings. But with Cui Buqu, who knew no martial arts, she didn't know where she stood.

If Bing Xian wished to kill Cui Buqu, she needed only one hand and one second. Cui Buqu would be dead before Feng-er and the others noticed. But there were many things in this world that couldn't be resolved through murder. Cui Buqu was like a deep pool, impossible for her to fathom.

"Cui-langjun, you look much thinner since our last meeting," Bing Xian said gently. "Government work is endless; you must take care of yourself."

Cui Buqu smiled. "Thank you for your concern. In contrast, your complexion has grown only more radiant; I trust your martial arts have improved by leaps and bounds."

Though she knew he couldn't possibly perceive the charm techniques she was using, Bing Xian felt a pang of embarrassment under Cui Buqu's sharp gaze. She dispensed with her probing and spoke candidly: "During the recent swordsmanship contest, I had the opportunity to observe the skills of various sects and gleaned some valuable insights. But I'm still far from reaching the level of Deputy Chief Feng."

Cui Buqu returned her candidness with his own. "I won't hide anything from you, Bing Xian-guniang. This case is perplexing, and we've made no headway. I'd like to ask for your assistance for a few more days."

Bing Xian considered this. “I assume these ‘few more days’ won’t be so few.”

“You’re perceptive indeed. If this case remains unresolved when we return to the capital, I must invite you to accompany us.”

Bing Xian’s smile remained unchanged, but the warmth had faded from her eyes. Her brows pinched slightly in unhappiness. “You suspect I’m the murderer? If I was, why would I throw myself into the net?”

Cui Buqu smiled faintly back at her. “Of course I believe you, Bing Xian-guniang. But I’ve handled too many cases where the murderer acted contrary to expectations and turned themselves in. This case has claimed more than fifty lives, including agents from the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus. Even if only out of an excess of caution, I must insist. I hope you understand.”

His tone was gentle as could be, yet he left no room for negotiation. Wrapped in his heavy cloak, the Zuoyue chief appeared pale and sickly, but his attitude was imperious.

Bing Xian sighed softly. “And what if I refuse?”

Cui Buqu remained unfazed. “Then I’ll simply have to compel you to stay.”

“As far as I know,” Bing Xian said slowly, “none of the Zuoyue Bureau’s experts are with Cui-langjun at the moment. These are all Deputy Chief Feng’s subordinates. Are you so sure he will help you detain me?”

Cui Buqu was silent, but his meaning was clear: *You cannot leave. You’re free to try.*

Bing Xian gave him a small, disbelieving smile, then floated gracefully out of the carriage. Her speed was remarkable, her garments fluttering like a celestial maiden’s. In an instant she was several yards away.

She wasn’t the strongest martial artist, but her skills placed her among the jianghu’s elite. The Zuoyue guards beside the carriage immediately moved to stop her, to no avail. Right behind them were Pei Jingzhe and Qin Miaoyu, but they were a step too late as well, soon left in Bing Xian’s wake.

Bing Xian breathed a silent sigh of relief. As she’d thought, no one here was capable of seizing her. She’d wanted to avoid conflict with Cui Buqu if possible. But this case was complex; it would take more than a couple of days, and she needed to return to her sect. Thus she chose the lesser of two evils. As long as Feng Xiao didn’t intervene, she could leave without issue.

A figure appeared in front of her.

He walked with his hands behind his back, his pace leisurely, as if merely out for a garden stroll. As if he’d been waiting for her.

Bing Xian was stunned—she hadn’t even seen him move—but she couldn’t stop now. “Deputy Chief Feng,” she said with a sigh.

“Running like this only makes you look guilty, you know.” Feng Xiao sighed as well. His tone was earnest. “It’s cold out here, so don’t waste my time. Go back.”

“And when did the Jiejian Bureau become Cui Buqu’s henchmen?” asked Bing Xian, her voice as gentle as ever. “To think there’s someone even the arrogant Deputy Chief Feng must submit to.”

Feng Xiao's tone was equally light. "*Arrogant* isn't exactly a compliment. Are you trying to flatter or provoke me? The deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau might not kill without a cause, but as a demonic practitioner, I need no reason at all to take your life."

Bing Xian was silent for a moment. Suddenly she smiled. "Since both you and Cui Buqu have said your piece, I have no choice but to obey. I hope you will solve the case quickly and prove my innocence."

With that, she turned and walked back toward the carriage.

When it came to adapting to their circumstances, no one was better than demonic practitioners. Bing Xian was true to type: The moment she realized the odds weren't in her favor, she compromised. She knew she was no match for Feng Xiao—there was no need to test it.

She had failed to anticipate this shift between Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao. Last time she'd seen them, they had clashed like oil and water, yet since then, they had developed some tacit understanding. It was a stark change.

Qin Miaoyu smothered her laughter as Bing Xian docilely mounted her horse.

Feng Xiao returned a moment later. He leapt into Cui Buqu's carriage just in time to see Cui Buqu give him a thumbs-up.

"The leap you performed just now, Deputy Chief Feng—truly majestic!" he said sincerely. After all, compliments cost him nothing. "It's only a shame my neck isn't long enough for me to have seen it more clearly, or I would surely have branded your grace and poise into my heart."

Feng Xiao arched a brow. "You think you can fob me off with a single compliment?"

"Then how about I throw in a couple more?"

Feng Xiao put a hand to his forehead. "Perhaps I overexerted myself earlier; I suddenly feel faint. I should probably rest early when we return. Of course I'll tell Pei Jingzhe and the others to keep a close watch in my stead…but if Bing Xian hears of this, she may take the chance to flee in the night. I fear I won't be able to stop her."

He rose to step off the carriage, only to feel a tug at his sleeve.

Cui Buqu was glaring at him. "Please stay for a moment, Deputy Chief Feng. We need to talk."

"Standing out in the wind has made me dizzy," said Feng Xiao. "I don't trust myself to walk at the moment."

Cui Buqu ground his teeth. "Allow me to give you a massage."

"My mouth hurts from talking so much," said Feng Xiao innocently.

They locked eyes for a long moment until—grudgingly—Cui Buqu conceded. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Feng Xiao's lips.

Feng Xiao remained still, his eyes dark and clear. He resembled an innocent lamb caught in the clutches of a villain, the helpless maiden captured by the ruthless tyrant.

Laughing in anger, Cui Buqu bit down, catching Feng Xiao off guard. Feng Xiao yelped in pain and shrank back, covering his mouth. He stared pitifully at Cui Buqu.

Cui Buqu was about to tell him to drop the act; it wasn't as if anyone could see it. But at that moment the sound of Pei Jingzhe's voice carried through the walls, followed by its owner lifting the curtain and leaning in.

"It's getting late, sir. The relay station might not have any hot meals ready, so I'll go on ahead and ask—"

He froze, staring at Feng Xiao, whose disheveled clothing and swollen lips put him in mind of a frightened rabbit. Cui Buqu's expression was hard, his gaze fierce, the picture of a ruffian in the middle of forcing himself on a woman.

Feng Xiao straightened his clothing and murmured, "Go then."

At being made to witness this, Pei Jingzhe felt he'd suffered a great injustice. He'd yet to return to his senses, but his body was already following Feng Xiao's command, humming an acknowledgment and spurring his horse forward. His thoughts would likely remain a mess for a while.

Feng Xiao tutted coquettishly at Cui Buqu. "Look what you've done. Now even the kid knows."

"My apologies." Cui Buqu's face was blank. "You are simply too enchanting; I momentarily lost my mind."

Feng Xiao sighed. "Understandable. Those who are exceptional will always be coveted by others. Isn't that so?"

Cui Buqu was silent for a spell. "Yes."

A hundred twists and turns and a thousand vexations lay behind that one-word reply—a perfect reflection of the feelings of Chief Cui, bound by their circumstances and unable to speak the words that hovered on the tip of his tongue.

Feng Xiao studied him, then chuckled. "All right, I won't tease you anymore. I truly am tired. I'll rest for a while; wake me once we get there."

So saying, he really did lie down and close his eyes in feigned sleep, no longer making trouble. Cui Buqu recalled how Feng Xiao had been at death's door after his qi deviation, utterly helpless, and his brow furrowed.

Their party had searched Yandang Mountain Estate from top to bottom and looked over dozens of corpses. They had grappled with a perplexing case while braving the biting wind, and everyone was exhausted. When they finally spotted the bright lanterns at the relay station's entrance, relief washed over them.

The staff at the station had been notified of their approach, and hot water, food, and even bedding were ready. The attendants ushered everyone into the back courtyard to rest.

Cui Buqu had scarcely stepped inside before a Zuoyue guard appeared at his elbow with a letter from the capital. The bureau's seal indicated that it was urgent.

Zhangsun Bodhi knew Cui Buqu was out in the field. He was comfortable managing routine matters on his own; he'd never send an urgent message unless some truly thorny problem had arisen. If Zhangsun thought something tricky, it was sure to be enormously difficult to deal with and require his immediate attention.

He unfolded the letter, which contained only a single line: *Murder case in the capital. Please hurry back if possible.*

Another murder case.

What kind of murder would require a deputy chief of their bureau to personally pen an urgent letter? Zhangsun's message suggested two things.

First: This case was beyond anything the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review could handle.

Second: There was something peculiar about the case, possibly related to the Zuoyue Bureau.

Cui Buqu frowned.

Not long after, Qin Miaoyu came over with the half bowl of lotus seed soup. "Cui-xiansheng," she said. "This soup isn't poisoned."

Chapter 161

THE MOST POPULAR method of testing for poison was via silver needle, but this could only detect arsenic. There were plenty of unknown poisons silver failed to identify.

Qin Miaoyu was thorough. She hadn't only dipped a silver needle in the bowl but also called for someone to bring in chickens and ducks and fed the birds the soup. An hour had passed and the birds were still flapping around, completely unaffected. Unless this was a slow-acting poison that required several days to do its work, the soup was just soup.

Cui Buqu listened to her explanation, then examined the bowl. After all the tests, a shallow splash of soup remained at the bottom. He picked the bowl up and sniffed it, just as he'd done back at the manor. "The soup is cold, but there's a faint fishy scent."

Qin Miaoyu nodded. "They added fish maw. Silver ear mushrooms and lotus seeds, boiled together with fish maw. It's an effective beauty tonic."

Cui Buqu knew little about beauty or skincare and never made unwarranted conjectures on topics he was unfamiliar with. He refrained from commenting. "A letter from Zhangsun just arrived. He wants me to return to the capital as soon as possible. Go ask Feng-er if he prefers to stay and continue the investigation or hand the case over to the officials of Luoyang for now and return with me."

Cui Buqu's intuition, honed by extensive experience, told him the investigation here was at an impasse. The perpetrator had fled before they arrived, so unless they struck again or Lin Yong provided new leads back at the capital, they would make no further progress.

"Regarding the corpses," Cui Buqu continued. "I'm recommending the Luoyang officials call in additional experts to conduct their own examinations. I'll leave a Zuoyue guard here to assist; if any new discoveries arise, they'll report back to the capital. The Jiejian Bureau might consider leaving some personnel here to do the same."

Qin Miaoyu was surprised but quickly replied, "I'll go ask the deputy chief now!"

"Wait." A trace of hesitation surfaced on Cui Buqu's face. Qin Miaoyu wondered if she was seeing things—Cui Buqu was a decisive person. He almost never looked unsure.

After a moment, he asked, "Does going to bed late dull the complexion?"

Qin Miaoyu was baffled. Something told her Cui Buqu's words held a deeper meaning. There was some secret here—one she needed to puzzle out herself—but her mind was momentarily blank. "I suppose so," she responded after a pause. "It should."

"Do you usually go to bed late?" asked Cui Buqu.

Qin Miaoyu blinked. "Back in the Kingdom of Khotan, I discovered some secret beauty techniques and created a miracle cream: As long as you use it diligently, late nights are of no concern. If your lordship is interested, I'd be more than happy to

offer it to you. Or…" Realization dawned. "Do you wish to gift it to our deputy chief?"

Cui Buqu stared at her. "Gift it to him? Why would you think that?"

Qin Miaoyu cursed herself for misspeaking. She watched him discreetly.

Suddenly Cui Buqu smiled. "I was merely thinking your skin is radiant, like jade—truly beautiful," he said gently. "It would be a shame to see it dulled by these late nights. There are many beauty secrets in the palace you might find useful. Next time I'm there, I'll ask the empress for a certain formula on your behalf."

Startled by the unexpected flattery, Qin Miaoyu's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Of course. Although you're a member of the Jiejian Bureau, you've made great contributions to our efforts against the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. The empress is known for her generosity; allow me to speak to her."

Any woman would be moved upon hearing these words, Qin Miaoyu not excepted. "Thank you very much, Chief Cui!"

From the moment they'd arrived in Guangqian County, their days had been a whirlwind. Qin Miaoyu was a skilled martial artist who had experienced her share of rough living, but even she couldn't suppress a contented sigh when she entered her room and saw the steaming soup and dishes the station porter had delivered.

This was how life was meant to be: filled with wealth and luxury. It should brim with bliss, one's desires fulfilled with the lift of a finger. She'd embraced this ideal from the day she'd joined the Buyeo Sect and received her orders to become Yuchi Jinwu's concubine and get close to the king of Khotan.

But everything had changed when Feng Xiao caught her in Liugong City: She was forced to surrender, turn over all the information she had, and join the Jiejian Bureau. Now she rose earlier than the roosters and slept later than the dogs. The cases she handled were delicate, and too often her life hung in the balance. Sometimes she found herself up against top-tier experts. Forget wealth and luxury—even going to sleep at a reasonable hour was a blessing.

She sensed Feng Xiao had yet to fully trust her. Her sectmate Su Xing, who had also been planted in Liugong City, had killed the Lu family's only daughter. He was long dead. Only Qin Miaoyu had survived—and in order to preserve her own insignificant life, she worked tirelessly. Day by day, she'd grown increasingly accustomed to living without luxuries, until even the sight of a warm meal brought her to tears.

Sorrow welled up within her heart. It seemed like she was going backward. Not long ago, she'd been surrounded by servants. Now—

"Qin-jiejie." Pei Jingzhe's voice came from outside. "After discussing with Chief Cui, our lord has decided to set off before dawn."

"Got it!" Qin Miaoyu called back. The sound of Pei Jingzhe's footsteps gradually receded. She put aside her melancholy, picked up her bowl, and began to eat. Less than six hours remained until they departed. And after she finished eating, she still had to wash before bed.

Wasn't she a frail and delicate woman? Why should she have to suffer such a miserable fate?!

If she could travel back in time, she'd give her past self—the one who'd stolen the Jade of Heaven Lake—a harsh slap on each cheek. *It's your fault for being greedy*

and shortsighted! Pack your bags and flee now, or you'll find yourself in the tiger's den as a glorified pack mule!

Qin Miaoyu wolfed down her food while weeping over her hardships.

The sun rose late at this time of year, the skies dark until almost seven in the morning. By the time she finished washing, it was past two. If she lay down now, she'd only have to get up again soon after, so she remained clothed and simply settled on the bed and meditated.

As morning approached, she roused herself and opened her eyes, slipping off the bed to put on her shoes and prepare for departure. The attendants at the relay station made their own preparations. By the time she arrived, the horses had been fed and were only waiting for the grooms to harness them.

Qin Miaoyu, perceptive as she was, felt the biting cold outside and immediately realized the bedding in the carriage wasn't thick enough for Cui Buqu. Though it might suffice for an ordinary person, someone of Chief Cui's constitution was sure to take a chill. Recalling his promise to procure some of the palace's beauty products for her, it occurred to her that if he fell ill during their journey, his entrance to the palace would be delayed. Determined to prevent this at all costs, she asked an attendant to fetch an extra blanket.

A delicate layer of frost still blanketed the carriage; even the footboard at its front, where the carriage's owner would board and where the coachman would sit, hadn't escaped its icy touch. Qin Miaoyu gave it a glance as she always did and froze.

The lantern at the station entrance swayed in the wind, flickering in the predawn darkness.

Pressed into the white frost were two footprints.

The prints were shallow, almost invisible. From their placement, it appeared someone had stepped right into the carriage. Hair rose on the back of her neck. All her fatigue vanished as she stumbled back a few steps, yelling, "Who's there? Come out!"

No sound came from within the carriage, but her voice had startled the others. They rushed forward; Qin Miaoyu drew Pei Jingzhe's sword from the sheath at his waist and sliced the curtain into two.

A figure sat cross-legged inside, barely visible in the dim light. His pale face was twisted, eyes wide open and mouth slightly ajar as he stared at Qin Miaoyu with an expression of terror and agony.

"Zhou Lao-Qi!" Pei Jingzhe gasped.

He was an eagle rider from the Jiejian Bureau who should have been undercover at Yandang Mountain Estate. After Lin Yong's capture, he'd been ordered to infiltrate the villa as a servant while secretly monitoring their every move. In the course of this gruesome case, both the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus had had a spy go missing. Now one of them was accounted for.

But where was the spy from the Zuoyue Bureau?

In the face of everyone's shock, Zhou Lao-Qi remained motionless, his agonized stare unchanged.

"He's dead," Ming Yue called out from the entrance. He had yet to recover from his injuries and spent most of the time resting in his carriage. But now his movements were swift as lightning; though he was nowhere near fully healed, it was

clear he was much better. He grabbed Zhou Lao-Qi and made to pull him out of the carriage, but the man barely budged.

Ming Yue set his mouth in a grim line. He pulled harder. The carriage swayed a little, but it was as if Zhou Lao-Qi had been glued to the interior.

"There's something under the carriage." Cui Buqu coughed several times. He'd come out upon hearing the commotion, his complexion even paler than the night before.

Pei Jingzhe ducked down to look beneath the carriage and exclaimed in horror, "There's a sword stabbed through the bottom!"

He pulled out the sword, and Zhou Lao-Qi finally slumped forward.

Everyone was aghast. It made sense now that Ming Yue had failed to move him—someone had placed Zhou Lao-Qi inside the carriage and nailed him in place. What was more, judging by his expression, he'd been alive when the sword pierced him.

To be impaled and left to slowly die in the dark—how must he have felt? Pei Jingzhe's insides clenched in sympathy; it would have been an agony few could endure.

"They're trying to intimidate us," said Ming Yue.

Pei Jingzhe's heart leapt into his throat. Their enemy was powerful enough to kill everyone in Yandang Mountain Estate; Zhou Lao-Qi had never stood a chance of escaping. His presence here was a message: The enemy not only knew he was a spy, but also that Feng Xiao and the others had arrived. Torturing Zhou Lao-Qi to death in front of them was more than just a stunt meant to provoke Feng Xiao—it was a direct challenge to the entire Jiejian Bureau.

Ming Yue was an amiable man, rarely angry. But at that moment, he was furious. "Erlang, we should stay in Luoyang and uncover the truth!"

Cui Buqu interjected before Feng Xiao could respond. "I suggest we leave now—this very minute."

Ming Yue respected and admired Cui Buqu. He suppressed his anger and said, "Chief Cui, this person is tracking our every move. If we don't eliminate the threat now, we will be in even more danger."

Pei Jingzhe and the others were silent, but their determined expressions mirrored Ming Yue's.

"Before sleeping last night, I inquired about the situation at the relay station," Cui Buqu explained. "Luoyang's relay station is large; in addition to us, there are three other groups staying here at the moment. One is a group of four heading to Xin'an County; another a group of six traveling scholars passing through. The last is a group of thirty-six who wish to enter the city, led by Duchess Yang Cheng, the daughter of the emperor's late brother, Prince Jing of Cai. When you add in all the staff and servants at the relay station, there are too many people. Word travels fast; our plans to leave must have leaked overnight. We could stay and investigate, but it's certain to delay us, and we might not find anything substantial. I suspect this is exactly our enemy's intent."

Feng Xiao, who had been silent until now, offered his conclusion: "You think they're trying to stop us from leaving Luoyang."

"Precisely." Cui Buqu nodded. "The more they want to stop us, the more imperative it is we return to the capital at once. Time is of the essence. We must

depart right away."

Ming Yue's brow furrowed, but he could find no objection to make.

As for Feng Xiao, he had already made up his mind. He had Pei Jingzhe notify the relay station and asked them to take Zhou Lao-Qi's body for proper burial. Cui Buqu took the carriage that had been Guan Shanhai's. The group swiftly gathered their belongings and prepared for departure, leading their horses out without even bidding the attendants at the station a farewell.

Three carriages set out from the city: Guan Shanhai and Ming Yue shared one, and Qin Miaoyu and Bing Xian rode in the second. Cui Buqu's carriage was sandwiched in the middle for his protection, flanked by several Zuoyue guards and Jiejian Bureau eagle riders.

Cui Buqu had just settled himself in the carriage, deep in thought, when Feng Xiao abandoned his horse and lifted the carriage curtain to slip in uninvited.

"It's so much warmer in here!" As Cui Buqu looked at him, speechless, Feng Xiao sighed comfortably and met his eyes. "The enemy is in hiding while we're in the open, so I've no choice but to risk my own safety to protect you. Don't forget who helped you stop Bing Xian last night."

Outside, little Pei-langjun, unable to share in his master's luxuries, was shivering in the cold wind on horseback.

Cui Buqu thought of the rare sight he'd glimpsed last night—an exhausted Feng Xiao—and bit back a retort. He pushed the waterskin he'd prepared over to Feng Xiao. "Here—it's warm."

Feng Xiao arched a brow. His sharp eyes caught sight of another waterskin of the same type nestled in the corner of the carriage.

So Cui Buqu had prepared this one specially for him.

The shadow of a smile flitted over his face as their gazes met. He accepted the waterskin and took a sip. The water had been freshly boiled before they left and was still warm. It slid down his throat, leaving a faint sweetness in its wake.

Feng Xiao blinked. He thought he'd imagined the sweetness due to his buoyant mood. But after a second sip, he realized it wasn't so—the water really was sweet.

"What did you put in this?"

"Poison." Cui Buqu flipped open his book without raising his head.

"Ahh." Feng Xiao drew out the sound. "Ice-fungus pills."

For a moment, Cui Buqu was silent. "My apologies, I gave you the wrong one. That was for Qin Miaoyu," he said coldly.

Feng Xiao sighed. "My venerable self is indeed peerless in all respects, with countless admirers across the land. But you shouldn't let that stop you from expressing your affection openly—why try to hide it?"

Cui Buqu sneered. "It's true I can't stand the ordinary or medi-ocre. Just because Deputy Chief Feng has taken a liking to me doesn't mean I return the sentiment. Don't you think concealing your feelings like this reflects poorly on you, a grandmaster of martial arts?"

"Who says I like you?" A faint smirk tugged at Feng Xiao's lips. "What could I possibly see in an invalid like you? Don't be so full of yourself. Maybe you're the

one who likes me."

Cui Buqu snorted. "You think I'd like a featherless peacock who's gilded on the outside and rotten on the inside?"

They locked eyes for a moment, then both looked away and ignored each other.

Ah, thought Feng Xiao. *What a liar!*

Cui Buqu sneered to himself. *How dishonest!*

Chapter 162

LUOYANG FADED INTO THE DISTANCE as they steadily approached the capital.

The skies were dim, with thick clouds looming overhead. The night dragged on, seemingly endless. Cold winds howled past their ears, but worse than the wind was the bone-piercing chill.

They veered off the main road onto a narrow path flanked by dense forest. Most of the leaves had fallen, and the flickering light of the lanterns at the head of the carriages imbued the bare woods with a sinister glow, as if something might leap from the shadows at any moment. Pei Jingzhe lifted his eyes to the sky, wondering when day would break. The longer he looked, the more he felt the sky was defiantly refusing to brighten.

They were almost halfway through the forest when the horizon began to gray, but true daylight was still a while off. The branches, once a mass of darkness, metamorphosed into a jagged network of interwoven silhouettes.

The good news was that it wasn't snowing; the bad news was that a thick fog had rolled in.

Great swirls of mist rose from the ground, which even the harsh winds failed to blow away. Fog quickly blanketed the entire forest, lapping at the bases of the withered trees. Their gnarled branches rose, claw-like, above the white haze.

Pei Jingzhe looked around with a sinking feeling. The road was long, the forest large, and yet—

That tree on the right up ahead looked a little familiar.

Cui Buqu's voice came from within the carriage. "We're going in circles."

It seemed one's greatest fears would always come true. Several stories of ghosts trapping travelers in the mist sprang to mind—but it wasn't the supernatural Pei Jingzhe feared.

Since the horrifying incident at Yandang Mountain Estate, an air of foreboding had permeated their journey. Zhou Lao-Qi's corpse, too, had been an ill omen. At Cui Buqu's insistence, they'd returned to the road, but a gnawing anxiety plagued the whole group. Pei Jingzhe had an ominous premonition that they were walking into a trap.

His heart constricted in his chest. But a moment later, the tension drained out of him as he was hit with a feeling almost like relief. It was better for trouble to come knocking than linger silently outside your door, leaving you uncertain as to when it might intrude.

By now, the others had all realized they were retreading the same ground. Pei Jingzhe ordered the procession to stop. "My lord, Chief Cui, let's wait for the fog to clear before—"

A scream pierced the air, drowning him out. He jerked his head toward the noise.

Within the fog, a dark shadow separated itself from a tree trunk and lunged at one of the eagle riders from the Jiejian Bureau. Caught off guard, the man was

yanked from his horse and dragged into the mist.

Pei Jingzhe leapt forward without thinking—but Feng Xiao was faster. Pei Jingzhe barely saw him move before the dark shadow slammed into the ground, releasing the eagle rider.

"Playing at being ghosts now, are we?" Feng Xiao sneered. His sleeve billowed, and the shadow screamed and went limp.

When Pei Jingzhe looked again, he saw only a man dressed in black. He didn't vanish into the air or sink into the ground. He really had been playing a ghost—a petty trick.

More shadowy figures materialized from the fog, springing toward the carriages from all directions. Pei Jingzhe quickly realized their attackers were all only average in skill. He and Qin Miaoyu, along with a few eagle riders from the Jiejian Bureau and the Zuoyue guards, held them off with ease.

"They're from the Chiyang Guild," said Cui Buqu, watching the battle. "Most of their martial arts originate from the Jinhuan Guild."

The leader of the Jinhuan Guild, Ning Shewo, was also chief helmsman of the Nine Guilds of Water Transport. Though the nine guilds were allied, the leaders of the other eight maintained a high level of independence; they weren't mere puppets for the Jinhuan Guild to command. The Chiyang Guild was the exception—their position had been given to them by Ning Shewo, so they followed the orders of the Jinhuan Guild's leader.

After the tavern brawl in Guangqian County, the young leader of the Jinhuan Guild, Leng Du, had brought a cadre of his elite to confront Feng Xiao and his people. Feng Xiao had taken his life in that fight. But though Leng Du was gone, Ning Shewo remained.

The sly old fox still refused to show himself and had sent others to perish in his stead. The figures in black stood no chance against Pei Jingzhe and the rest; they were clearly expendable. Yet he still felt a sliver of doubt. Was the combined might of the Chiyang and Jinhuan Guilds truly enough to massacre all of Yandang Mountain Estate? Hadn't the old coroner claimed fifty-some people lost their minds and slaughtered each other? And if the Chiyang and Jinhuan Guilds weren't the culprits, who else was watching from within the fog?

Amid the scuffle, a man dropped from the sky, striking straight for the middle carriage containing Cui Buqu. The roof of the carriage crumpled and split open beneath the man's palm. But the man didn't have the time to do the same to Cui Buqu's skull.

Feng Xiao had already arrived.

The two exchanged several blows in midair. In an instant, they'd leapt from the carriage's battered roof to the branches several feet away, their movements too swift to follow.

Feng Xiao didn't need to see his opponent's face to recognize him. The moment they clashed, he knew his identity. "Lao-Yuan, do you love me so much you insist on dying by my hand?"

Yuan Sansi's expression was like a thundercloud. Truly, when it came to encountering your enemies, the world was a small place.

After their last battle, Yuan Sansi had fled with heavy wounds. He still wasn't fully recovered. He dared not confront Feng Xiao's full power and retreated as he fought, slipping out from under Feng Xiao's blows. Feng Xiao had long since surpassed Yuan Sansi in skill, but killing him was easier said than done when he refused to engage.

Yuan Sansi found the pressure on him significantly alleviated when two more joined the fray. The leader of the Jinhuan Guild, Ning Shewo, and the leader of the Chiyang Guild, Hong Li, surged forward to join the fight.

Ning Shewo was cunning to the core. During the battle on Mount Tiannan, he'd seen the writing on the wall and slipped away, thus escaping Yuxiu's fate. For years he'd successfully led the Nine Guilds of Water Transport and roamed the southern jianghu. Though he wasn't in the top ten, he'd established himself as one of the elite. Had he joined Yuxiu in battle, they might have defeated Feng Xiao in the caves. And while the Chiyang Guild may have served as the Jinhuan Guild's lackeys, their leader, Hong Li, was famous in his own right for his imperious Iron Sand Palms.

The three of them quickly surrounded Feng Xiao. Now it would be even more difficult for Feng Xiao to kill Yuan Sansi—he might even escape his clutches entirely.

Back at the carriages, the battle was in full swing.

After force-feeding the bowl of silver ear soup to the ducks and chickens, they'd brought the birds along in case any signs of poisoning emerged over the next few days. In the chaos, the birds broke free, clucking and quacking as they bolted toward freedom without looking back.

Cui Buqu was standing beside the ruined carriage watching the fight when he heard a rustling sound behind him.

A man had appeared at the back of the carriage. He was deathly pale, his eyes bloodshot. His gaze—cold and empty, with a hint of madness—slid over Cui Buqu as if he were no different than the surrounding rocks and trees.

Cui Buqu knew him at once. "Lu Ming."

The Zuoyue spy who'd gone missing during the Yandang Mountain Estate massacre.

If Lu Ming recognized his own name, he showed no reaction. Nor did he recognize his superior in the Zuoyue Bureau. He clawed at Cui Buqu with the crooked fingers of his right hand, the strike swift and savage and aimed right for Cui Buqu's neck.

As Cui Buqu reeled backward to evade the blow, he realized Lu Ming's steps were stumbling and erratic. Yet Lu Ming leapt unhesitatingly forward, refusing to let his prey flee.

It was Qin Miaoyu who came to Cui Buqu's rescue, plunging her sword into Lu Ming's chest. The man paused for only an instant before seizing the blade and yanking it out with inhuman force. What normal person could do such a thing? Qin Miaoyu was stunned. She looked at Lu Ming, then thought back to Zhou Lao-Qi in the carriage and made a horrific connection.

Cui Buqu seemed to guess the direction of her thoughts. "He's not dead! He's been poisoned with something that's destroyed his mind!"

Qin Miaoyu shuddered. Wresting her sword away, she beheaded Lu Ming with a single clean slash. Blood misted the air.

She took great care with her appearance. Fearing the blood might stain her clothes, she grabbed Cui Buqu and retreated a few steps as Lu Ming's head soared through the air, then rolled a short distance and stopped at Pei Jingzhe's feet.

"What is *that*?!" exclaimed the black-clad man fighting Pei Jingzhe.

Everyone turned to see a black worm, roughly the length of a finger, wriggling its way out of the stump of the man's neck. Qin Miaoyu snatched up a stone and hurled it, smashing the worm into bloody paste before it could abandon its host.

"There's a third party at play here," said Cui Buqu coldly.

Qin Miaoyu had been as baffled as any of them, but with this comment, everything clicked into place. Judging by the terrified reactions of the men in black, they had no connection to Lu Ming and the worm. The enemy had probably also lured them here, hoping to pit the two groups against each other.

But other than the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, who else could be scheming against them?

Qin Miaoyu's heart sank. It seemed they weren't out of danger yet.

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A distance away, Yuan Sansi and Feng Xiao were still fighting. By now Yuan Sansi had realized Feng Xiao had no intention of killing him.

"Were you the ones who attacked Yandang Mountain Estate?" Feng Xiao asked between blows.

Yuan Sansi grunted, refusing to answer.

"Were your bureaus not the true culprits?" Ning Shewo asked.

Feng Xiao sneered. "Enough with your games!"

As if they'd reached some tacit understanding, all four eased their attacks. Ning Shewo knew they were at a disadvantage. Hoping to de-escalate the situation, he spoke in an amiable tone. "Deputy Chief Feng, you misunderstand. We came to attend the swordsmanship contest and were stunned by the tragedy at Yandang Mountain Estate. When we discovered such legendary investigators as Deputy Chief Feng and Chief Cui had taken charge of the case, we believed it was safe to leave. We certainly didn't expect to run into you here." Despite his meandering answer, his point was clear: He and his people were not responsible for the massacre, and they hadn't been following Feng Xiao's group.

Impatient at Ning Shewo's rambling, Yuan Sansi cut in. "Some of our subordinates went missing. While we were tracking them, we came across you by chance."

It was a remarkable sight: Two parties that had been as opposed as fire and water set their weapons aside for a peaceful conversation. All saw it at once—someone had drawn them here deliberately.

Feng Xiao paled. Ignoring the other three, he rushed back the way he'd come. His speed was extraordinary. In a blink, he was standing before the carriages. But they and the horses were all that remained—the people had disappeared without a trace.

“Cui Buqu! Hey, Cui bastard!” Feng Xiao called for him, but the desolate woods responded only with swirling mist. Even if Cui Buqu had been abducted, Ming Yue and the others had been here too. They couldn’t have all vanished without a trace.

He drew a deep breath and detected a faint fragrance, like the warm scent of wood. It was the middle of winter. Where would a scent like that come from?

A hint of red flashed at the corner of his eye. Feng Xiao looked down.

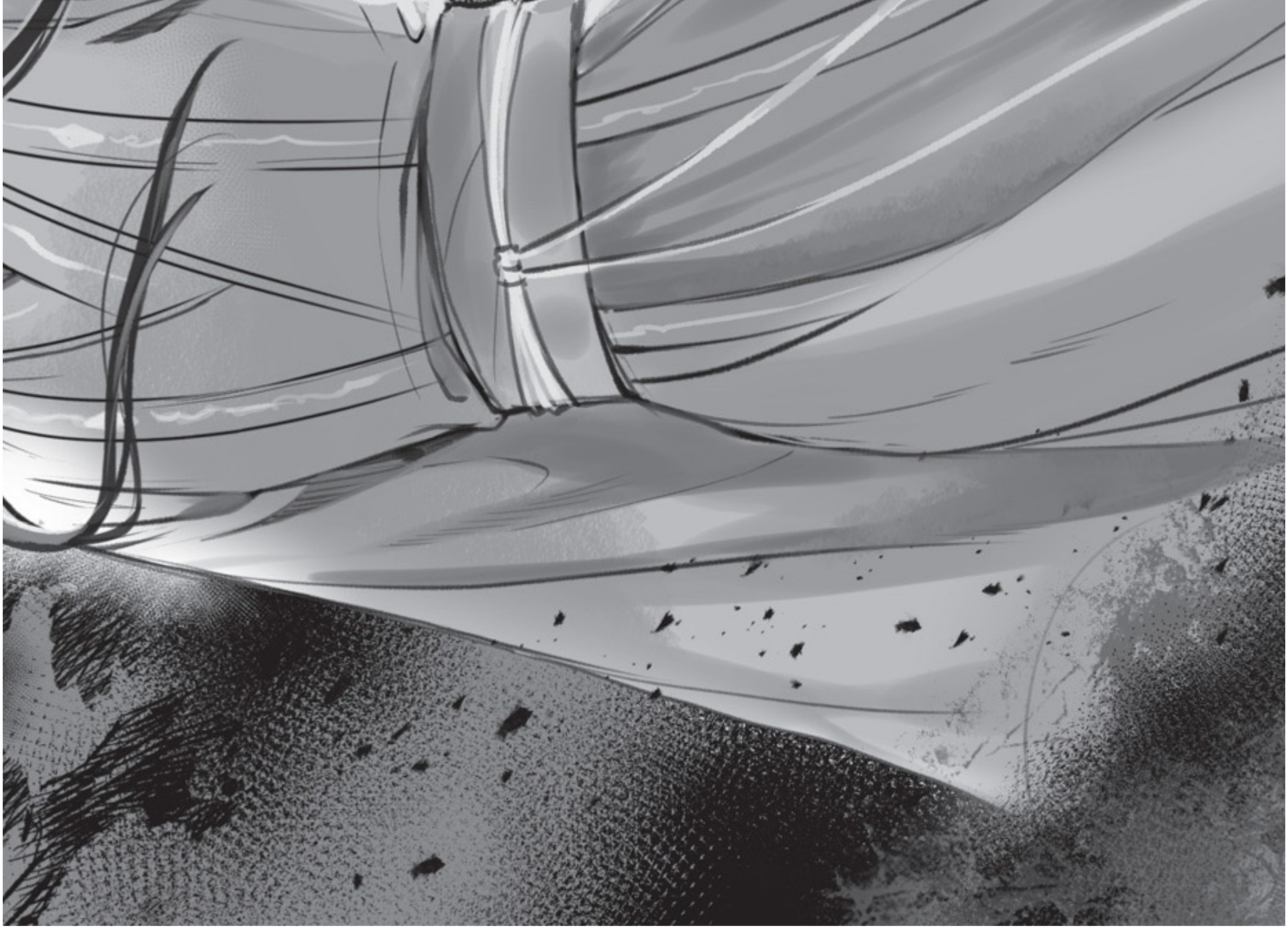
Blood.

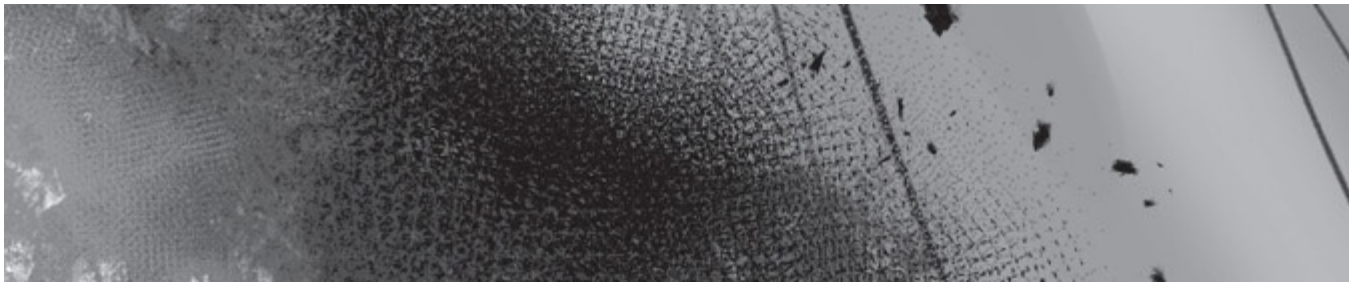
A meandering trail of blood left by an open wound. It stretched away and into the dense fog ahead. Step by step, he slowly followed the trail. The coppery scent grew stronger as he walked—so strong it was as if a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood lay before him.

But Feng Xiao saw neither. When the fog parted, he saw Cui Buqu lying collapsed on the ground not far ahead. Qin Miaoyu half-sprawled over him, taking great bites out of his flesh. At the sound of approaching footsteps, she jerked her head up. Her face was smeared with blood. Bare white bone showed through on Cui Buqu’s arm where she’d been feasting.

A chill raced down Feng Xiao’s spine. Face ashen, he rushed forward without thinking.

A dark shadow drifted soundlessly toward him from behind.





Chapter 163

THE DARK SHADOW swept toward him, certain of its success.

Feng Xiao whirled mid-charge, his fingers plucking at his zither strings. Charged with true qi, they produced a sound that sliced through the air and pierced the black shadow.

Instantly, the shadow transformed into black smoke and dissipated into nothingness.

Feng Xiao wasted no time. He unleashed two more bursts of true qi at the figures of Cui Buqu and Qin Miaoyu. Two more shadows disintegrated.

Fake. All of it was fake.

"A bunch of petty tricks!" sneered Feng Xiao.

The illusions were impressive—but he wasn't so easily fooled. He'd seen that decrepit old coot Fan Yun's Ursa Major Twin Jade Array, after all. In comparison, this spectacle was like a child's first attempt.

As the three shadows fragmented, the fog lifted at last to reveal the luminous moon.

The sky had brightened without them noticing. Though their surroundings remained desolate, the oppressive flicker of dim light and ghostly shadows had completely disappeared, the sinister gloom giving way to the clean light of the moon overhead.

Feng Xiao turned. Yuan Sansi and his three companions remained trapped in the illusion, unable to break free.

Hong Li swung his saber in a frenzied rage, then hurled himself headfirst into a tree trunk with a sickening *thud*. He collapsed limply to the ground, blood and brain matter oozing from his shattered skull.

Yuan Sansi and Ning Shewo fared slightly better thanks to their more solid martial arts. Ning Shewo stood frozen, a frown wrinkling his brow, while Yuan Sansi simply clenched his jaw. His eyes were trained on Feng Xiao, caught between clarity and confusion.

There was no trace of the carriages.

Feng Xiao had thought to let the remaining two perish, but now he reconsidered. They were all in the same boat; it would be wiser to keep them around in case they encountered another foe. With a flick of his fingers, zither strings flew out, striking for the space between their eyebrows. They shuddered, their eyes focusing as their befuddlement fell away.

Ning Shewo felt as if he'd woken from a deep sleep. His expression swiftly went from dazed to alert. Yuan Sansi was a cut above Ning Shewo in skill. He tilted his head to dodge and countered with his whip sword, which wrapped around the zither strings as he stepped aside. Feng Xiao sent another string whistling toward Yuan Sansi's shoulder. He darted a few steps back before also coming to his senses.

“What happened?” Ning Shewo’s expression was grim. His first thought upon seeing Hong Li crumpled on the ground was that Feng Xiao had killed him. But if that were the case, Feng Xiao ought to have taken the chance to kill Ning Shewo as well. Ning Shewo took a moment to gather himself. After concluding Hong Li had ended his own life, he ignored the corpse and surveyed his surroundings. “Are we trapped in an array? Does Deputy Chief Feng know how to break it?”

“If I did, I’d have killed you both,” said Feng Xiao bluntly.

Ning Shewo pretended not to hear his tone. He smiled shamelessly. “Then I must thank Deputy Chief Feng for his great mercy. The enemy seeks to trap us here and provoke us into slaughtering one another. Yet you hold no grudges and choose to collaborate instead! Truly commendable.”

Feng Xiao studied him, then turned to Yuan Sansi. “Is this the real Ning Shewo? Or an illusion?”

“Real!” Yuan Sansi snapped. “He spends half his time talking to officials of the Chen dynasty. All officials speak like this at court!”

“I don’t,” said Feng Xiao.

This was true. Feng Xiao’s abilities spoke for themselves; he had no need for a honeyed tongue. In light of their circumstances, Yuan Sansi barely held himself back from making a scathing remark.

Feng Xiao seemed completely relaxed. His clever fingers wove together the two strings in his hand to make a tightly furled flower.

The corner of Yuan Sansi’s eye twitched.

Feng Xiao shook the flower; with a flourish of his wrist, it bloomed, and the strings separated once more into strands. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Yuan Sansi said nothing. Why was he watching the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau perform parlor tricks? Even as the thought occurred to him, he knew the answer: because they were completely unable to leave.

Ning Shewo left to wander the misty woods around them. He sank into the fog and disappeared, only to re-emerge some time later on the other side of the clearing, breathless and fatigued. He met Yuan Sansi’s eyes and shook his head—there was no way out. There were a hundred promising paths, yet none of them had delivered him through the mist.

Now that they knew they’d been caught in an enemy’s trap, Yuan Sansi and Ning Shewo had no more desire to fight. If they wished to settle things with Feng Xiao, it would have to wait until after they were free.

But who would bring two sets of nemeses together like this? Yuan Sansi could think of only one man: Fan Yun.

He had betrayed the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, but he wasn’t on Feng Xiao’s side either. What was more, he was an expert in arrays and divination. He was the prime suspect.

Yuan Sansi looked around. Three elite martial artists, and they were all hopelessly trapped. If word of this got out, no one would believe it.

Feng Xiao sat down cross-legged, wracking his brains for a means of escape. He pulled a mandarin from his sleeve and began to peel it as he thought.

It was a mandarin he'd taken from Pei Jingzhe before setting off that morning. He'd wanted to tease Cui Buqu with it; he hadn't anticipated stumbling into this damn array. The fruit, warmed inside his sleeve, was exceptionally sweet on his tongue.

Seeing Feng Xiao savor each segment, Yuan Sansi bit the inside of his cheek. "Are you not eager to leave, Deputy Chief Feng?" he ground out.

"I can't break the array," Feng Xiao replied, matter-of-fact. "What point is there running around in circles? We must wait to be rescued."

Ning Shewo looked at him hopefully. "Do your companions include someone proficient with arrays?"

"Yes. Cui Buqu."

Yuan Sansi scoffed. "Do you seriously believe Cui Buqu will save you, Deputy Chief Feng? Forgive me for saying so, but your death here would be no great loss for him."

Feng Xiao smiled. "That's where you're wrong. Even if he'd only met me once by chance, he'd come to my rescue."

Let alone after what he said that night at the tavern.

Yuan Sansi furrowed his brow. He didn't want to hear the answer, yet he couldn't stop himself from asking. "Why?"

"Because of my face, my charm, my every graceful motion. They are all peerless and without parallel in the world," said Feng Xiao with perfect composure.

Yuan Sansi was speechless. For the first time in his life, he began to suspect that exceptional martial artists must have some serious shortcomings in other areas. In Feng Xiao's case, his brain.

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Pei Jingzhe could never have anticipated running into Qiao Xian here.

She looked like her usual cold and indifferent self, but the moment she appeared, she grabbed his arm. "Quick, come with me. I know the way out!"

"Qiao-niangzi?!" Pei Jingzhe stammered. "Wait, what are you doing here?"

Qiao Xian turned to look at him, frowning. "I encountered a robbery on my way and thought you might be in danger too, so I turned around to follow you. Looks like I was right—you're in grave danger."

Pei Jingzhe allowed her to drag him several steps forward before he came to his senses and dug his heels into the ground. "No—my lord and Chief Cui are still inside! We have to save them!"

"They're already out! I just saw them."

"Where?" Pei Jingzhe asked, confused. "Why didn't I see them?"

Qiao Xian pointed.

Pei Jingzhe looked where she indicated. He was about to say there was nothing there when he spotted the black arrow winging toward him. Before he could dodge, he felt a hand grip his wrist as Qiao Xian pulled him into an embrace, blocking the

arrow with her own back.

"Qiao Xian!" Pei Jingzhe held up her slumping body. His mind had gone blank.

"Hurry… Go!" Qiao Xian coughed blood between each word.

"We'll go together! I won't abandon you!"

But the arrow had done its work. Black blood seeped from the wound and spread to cover Qiao Xian's entire back, staining Pei Jingzhe's hands. The smell grew heavier, a foul, oozing stench that clogged his nose and throat and rendered him unable to move.

"Qiao…"

In his arms, Qiao Xian was visibly rotting away, her delicate features withering like an ephemeral spring bloom. But he couldn't let go. Pei Jingzhe gritted his teeth. He liked Qiao Xian, but not only because of her looks. Even if her beautiful face decayed into old bones, she would remain Qiao Xian. He would never be a shallow man whose love was only skin deep!

Pei Jingzhe cried out as agony pierced his skull, and a different smell wafted into his nostrils. It had the spicy bite of ginger and pepper yet was more pungent than both. He felt like someone had ripped off his head and snapped him back to reality. He looked down. All his hair stood on end, and his soul almost fled his body.

The one he was holding was not a dying Qiao Xian, but the man whose head Qin Miaoyu had sent flying, Lu Ming. Had he been weeping and wailing while cradling a headless corpse?

"Are you stupid?!" Qin Miaoyu couldn't take it anymore. She slapped the back of his head.

"Why are you just sitting there? Get up and help solve the array!" Cui Buqu urged. He stood a few feet away, frowning and coughing as he spoke.

Pei Jingzhe sorely wanted to toss the corpse in his arms to the ground, but then thought it would be disrespectful. Face twitching, he slowly released his grip.

The battle still churned around them.

Ming Yue and Guan Shanhai, along with the Jiejian Bureau's eagle riders and the Zuoyue guards, clashed with the elites from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai who'd ambushed them. None were able to distinguish friend from foe as they tore at each other in a tangle of frenzied limbs. Ming Yue and Guan Shanhai were slightly better off: Though they swung their swords at the illusions, succumbing to the urge to vent their bloodlust, their brows were pinched and steps stumbling as they resisted.

Corpses from both sides littered the ground. Qin Miaoyu herself had accumulated her fair share of sword wounds. If this went on, it wouldn't matter how skilled they were as martial artists. The moment they depleted their internal energy, death awaited them.

Pei Jingzhe was dumbfounded, utterly at a loss.

"It's the fragrance here—there's something wrong with it," Qin Miaoyu rapidly explained. "It's the same one we smelled back at the manor. I had my suspicions then, so I gathered what spices I could find and ground them into a powder. It will clear your mind for now, but it's only a temporary solution. We need to break through the array!"

Back in Liugong City, it was Qin Miaoyu's expertise in fragrances that secured her position as Miao-niangzi, earning the favor of the dance house's finest performer. This same skill led Feng Xiao to grant her reprieve and take her into the Jiejian Bureau. Qin Miaoyu was naturally sensitive to scents, but she could only use her skill to cut through the fragrance clouding their minds. She couldn't solve the array—that was left to Cui Buqu.

Cui Buqu had covered his mouth and nose with a cloth coated in Qin Miaoyu's spice blend to shield him from the poisonous fragrance. Qin Miaoyu and Pei Jingzhe looked at him in desperation. All their hopes were pinned on him. Barring the coachmen, Cui Buqu was the only one present who wasn't a martial artist. Yet only he was capable of saving them.

"Cut down the trees," he said after a moment.

Pei Jingzhe was stupefied. "Which trees?"

"All the trees you can see," said Cui Buqu coldly. "Chop them all down!"

Chapter 164

THEIR SWORDS WERE INCAPABLE of chopping down trees, even when infused with true qi. Unless they possessed one of those legendary blades able to cleave through metal and stone, the edges would dull after a few blows.

They had no axes; all they could use was their hands and feet.

Resigned, Pei Jingzhe approached a nearby tree. One palm strike cracked the trunk. A kick splintered it, and the tree tilted precariously. With the third and final strike, the tree toppled.

His hands stung horribly, yet Qin Miaoyu still found him too slow. “Hurry up!” she said. “The third chief is at his limit!”

Pei Jingzhe grimaced and was about to move on to the next tree when he caught sight of something black and wriggling. He looked down and gasped.

A long worm was wiggling its way out from the break in the hollowed-out trunk.

Qin Miaoyu’s eyes were keen, her hands swift. She flicked her sword, and in an instant the worm was sliced to ribbons. Disgust contorted her face as she looked at her sword tip, smeared with blood and flesh. “The tree isn’t the source of the fragrance. It’s the worms!”

Pei Jingzhe felled another tree. Once again, the hollow center contained a black worm.

Every tree was the same.

Both Pei Jingzhe and Qin Miaoyu were stunned. After several more trees toppled, they began to notice something strange: The thick fog that shrouded the forest slowly started to lift. The woods, once dense and seemingly endless, had markedly thinned.

Newly energized, Pei Jingzhe redoubled his efforts, ignoring his numb and reddened palms as he snapped a few more trees. Qin Miaoyu followed his lead, targeting the worms.

As the fragrance gradually dissipated, the agonizing sensation of grogginess began to fade. Pei Jingzhe raised his hand to strike the next cypress in front of him when he heard Qin Miaoyu call from behind: “Watch out!”

A figure had emerged from behind a thick tree trunk. In the blink of an eye, they were upon Pei Jingzhe, striking out with a palm. Taken by surprise, Pei Jingzhe dodged too late—the blow caught him on the shoulder.

Unbearable pain exploded through him, as if a needle had pierced him to the bone. The prickling agony made him long to chop off his own arm.

“Seal all the acupoints around your shoulder!” Cui Buqu cried.

Pei Jingzhe didn’t think; he obeyed instinctively. Qin Miaoyu lunged forward with her sword, engaging the black-clad figure in combat.

“There’s…there’s something alive in my shoulder!” cried Pei Jingzhe, his face ashen. “It’s moving!”

“Lie down!” Cui Buqu commanded. He tore open Pei Jingzhe’s clothing. A red dot marred his shoulder, no larger than a grain of rice. It was as small as a mosquito bite, impossible to notice without close inspection.

“What is it? What—what is it?” Pei Jingzhe stammered. Everything had happened too quickly. He hadn’t seen what the figure in black was holding, but a simple poisoned weapon wouldn’t have terrified him so. He could feel something alive and wriggling within his shoulder. If he hadn’t sealed his meridians, the creature would have wormed its way further in.

Hefting a dagger, Cui Buqu made an incision over the red dot, then tore open the wound with his hands. Blood ran out. Pei Jingzhe was in agony, drenched in cold sweat; it took all his willpower to remain still.

Amid the raw and bloody flesh, Cui Buqu could see something small and black. It writhed, desperately trying to burrow back into Pei Jingzhe’s flesh as if it feared the light.

The man in black locking blades with Qin Miaoyu looked over in alarm. He sprang toward Cui Buqu, but Qin Miaoyu blocked his path. The man grabbed her whip sword with bare hands and yanked with surprising strength. Qin Miaoyu was dragged forward, stumbling. A chill wind bore down on her from above, so suddenly she had no time to retreat.

This is it, she thought and squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to look. In a moment her skull would be shattered, spraying its contents over the woods.

But the expected blow never arrived. Pei Jingzhe had lurched upright and latched onto the man in black, holding him in place long enough for Qin Miaoyu to escape. Opening her eyes, she took a deep breath and silently vowed never to call Pei Jingzhe stupid again. She retracted her whip sword and leapt upright in readiness to confront the man in black.

The pain in Pei Jingzhe’s shoulder was worsening. Cui Buqu hadn’t had time to remove the worm before he’d been forced to jump up to save Qin Miaoyu. Now, as he released his true qi, the worm burrowed deeper. Soon half his shoulder had lost all sensation.

“Oh my!” a voice called out. “A-Qu, you really did come to my rescue!”

The owner of that voice often bullied and mocked him. But hearing it now, Pei Jingzhe’s eyes stung with tears. “Sir! There’s a worm in my shoulder!”

Even when severely wounded on the brink of death, Pei Jingzhe could grit his teeth and endure. But insects and worms happened to be his greatest fear, and now a nameless one was burrowing into his flesh. The thought of Zhou Lao-Qi and Lu Ming and the horrific sight of the worm in the corpse filled him with unspeakable horror.

“Good heavens. Is the worm laying eggs inside your body? Will thousands of worms emerge if they hatch?” Feng Xiao drawled. The man in black was caught off guard as Feng Xiao materialized behind him, silent as a ghost. A single strike of Feng Xiao’s palm sent him face-first into the ground, unconscious or dead.

To think Feng Xiao was in the mood to make fun of Pei Jingzhe even now.

Pei Jingzhe’s face drained of color. He felt as if his soul was about to scatter to the winds, and the hair on his head threatened to break free of his topknot with how hard it was straining to stand on end. He couldn’t resist looking at Lu Ming’s head, lying on its side not far away. It stared back at him. Its eyes were hollow and vacant,

bleak and full of despair, as if calling for him to join Lu Ming in the underworld.

"Don't move!" Cui Buqu held Pei Jingzhe down like a fish flailing on the chopping board. The worm had burrowed deeper. It was now nestled in his shoulder, just over the right side of his chest. His skin shifted like it was alive as the creature wriggled beneath it.

"Chief Cui," cried Pei Jingzhe. "I don't want to go insane and attack you like the people from Yandang Mountain Estate. If it's hopeless, please kill me!" He gritted his teeth, trembling in fear. "Tell my lord I've hidden a stash of money in my room at the Jiejian Bureau. It's on the fourth rafter. Ask him to purchase some paper money and burn it for me in the future; I'm afraid I won't have enough in the underworld!"

By the time he'd finished speaking, his voice was quavering with tears.

Cui Buqu's face was expressionless. "Feng-er. Seal his meridians; we need to prevent the worm from moving. Qin Miaoyu, grab it when I say the word."

Qin Miaoyu nodded hastily.

Feng Xiao was much more heavy-handed than Qin Miaoyu, but he was also faster. He tapped Pei Jingzhe's body at several points, rendering him immobile. Pei Jingzhe was forced to watch helplessly as Cui Buqu opened several long slashes on the right side of his chest.

The worm seemed to detect the danger. The moment the flesh it occupied was exposed, it tried to burrow away again. But Cui Buqu had been thorough—no matter where it went, a bit of it remained visible.

"Grab it!" Cui Buqu cried.

Qin Miaoyu scattered a handful of spices. The worm recoiled at the scent, its body going rigid. Seizing her chance, Qin Miaoyu's hand flashed out and grabbed the creature. The worm's tail was hooked inside Pei Jingzhe's body; flesh and blood came away with it as she yanked it free.

Qin Miaoyu had coated her hand in spices, but she didn't dare hold the worm for too long. She flung it to the ground. The instant it landed, Feng Xiao flicked a stone from his fingers and struck it dead.

At the same moment, the man in black reared up and spat out a mouthful of dark blood. His formerly unassuming features began to wither and age, transforming from a man in his thirties to a man around seventy or eighty years old. A strand of gray hair peeked from beneath his black hood as he sank back to the ground, dead. Immediately, the remaining trees shrank and withered, the fog scattered, and the fragrance vanished without a trace.

Freed from their hallucinations and exhausted beyond measure, everyone doubled over and retched.

Yuan Sansi, reeling from the effects of the man in black's strange spell, had forgotten all about striking his weakened enemies. Now that the illusions had faded, Feng Xiao was reunited with Cui Buqu and their forces; he lost his chance to attack. He slipped quietly away.

By the time Ning Shewo looked around, Yuan Sansi was long gone. He silently cursed him while smiling and cupping his hands to Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu. "Thank you both for the timely rescue. If not for you two, I'm afraid I would be trapped in the array even now. Who knew there was another master of arrays as formidable as Fan-xiansheng!"

“The arrays were amateur work,” said Cui Buqu. He pointed to the long black worm. “This, on the other hand, is impressive.”

“May I inquire as to what this venomous worm might be?” Ning Shewo asked humbly.

Cui Buqu shot him a glance. “Why should I tell you?”

Ning Shewo was taken aback, but he continued to smile. “You’re right. It’s only that I admire the two of you very much. Please let me go this time. From now on, the Jinhuan Guild won’t take a single step north of the Yangtze River. And if the two of you find yourselves in the south, we will do everything in our power to serve you!”

Cui Buqu’s answer was cold. “I want you to relay a message to Xiao Lü.”

In that case, he wouldn’t kill Ning Shewo today. Relieved, Ning Shewo said, “Of course, Chief Cui!”

“Inform him of everything that transpired today. Ask him if he’s interested in collaborating on this matter. If he agrees, tell him to meet me at the Zuoyue Bureau in the capital.”

“Collaborate?” Ning Shewo’s gaze instantly sharpened.

Cui Buqu smiled. “As they say, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It seems we have a common enemy. After we deal with them, I shall return to opposing the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. I believe this is something both Pavilion Leader Xiao and Guild Leader Ning will understand, no?”

Ning Shewo smiled in return. “Of course, it’s just as you say!”

Throughout their conversation, Ning Shewo had snuck repeated glances at Feng Xiao. It was obvious which of them he truly feared.

“Lao-Ning,” said Feng Xiao. “What do you think, am I good-looking?”

Ning Shewo started, then smiled. “Of everyone I’ve encountered in my lifetime, Deputy Chief Feng’s looks are the most outstanding!” This wasn’t entirely flattery to try and save his own skin. Feng Xiao’s face was indeed extraordinary.

Feng Xiao smiled wider, then sighed. “Ah, but it can be such a burden!”

Ning Shewo itched to slap him, but he maintained his smile and asked with a hint of childish curiosity: “What’s a burden?”

“You see, someone as handsome and dashing as I must spend so much effort maintaining my appearance. For example, I require spring water from the mountains to bathe in—ideally fresh snowmelt. And my clothes must be sewn from soft, delicate silk to prevent any irritation to my skin. Understand?”

Ning Shewo said nothing, bewilderment written all over his face. He’d always considered himself astute—he’d taken to the intrigues of the Southern dynasty like a fish to water and had a knack for perceiving the malice too often concealed within polite words. Yet he found himself perplexed as to what Feng Xiao meant. In truth, Ning Shewo was a man of some importance. Had anyone else attempted to flaunt their cleverness before him, he’d have dealt with them swiftly. But right now, he not only couldn’t afford to get angry, he had to stand here riddling out Feng Xiao’s hidden message. “Deputy Chief Feng, I’m afraid I’m too dull; could you explain yourself clearly?”

“He’s saying he’s a money-guzzling beast,” Cui Buqu said icily. “He always needs more of it, so if you’re smart, you’ll offer money in exchange for your life.”

Understanding finally dawned. Ning Shewo dug in his pockets for all his gold, silver, and copper coins, and grabbed the jade pendant from his waist. “I was in a hurry when I set off and didn’t bring many valuables. Please accept these offerings, small as they are, Deputy Chief Feng. Once I get back, I’ll gather strings of coins by the thousands and deliver them to the Jiejian Bureau!”

Feng Xiao made a face. “This is only your share. What about your subordinates? And Yuan Sansi? Since he left, you’ll have to pay for him too.”

Ning Shewo nearly coughed up blood in rage. *Why should I have to pay for Yuan Sansi? He ran away!* But he was at their mercy; he had no choice but to comply. He urged his subordinates to take out whatever valuables they had on them.

Before long, a small heap of wealth was gathered on the ground. There was gold, silver, copper—even a dagger encrusted with precious gems, along with jade pendants of more middling quality.

On their own, each item wasn’t worth much. But added together they were enough for Feng Xiao to eat and drink at the capital’s best restaurant every day for a year.

Feng Xiao sighed. “The Nine Guilds of Water Transport do well for themselves, don’t they?”

Ning Shewo laughed dryly. “Deputy Chief Feng is too kind. May I go now?”

“What about your clothes?” asked Feng Xiao. “And everyone else’s weapons.”

“Huh?” Ning Shewo thought he’d heard wrong. He forced a smile. “Deputy Chief Feng, please don’t joke around.”

Feng Xiao smiled back. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

The corner of Ning Shewo’s mouth twitched. Grudgingly, he stripped off his clothes. The others did the same until they had surrendered everything except their underpants. It was the freezing winter months, and they’d just emerged from an intense battle. They shivered in the cold until Feng Xiao finally, mercifully, let them go.

“Take these items to the carriage,” Feng Xiao instructed. “Once we arrive, everyone here today will receive a share: The injured will receive double, while the gravely wounded and deceased will receive triple.”

“Thank you, Deputy Chief!” Qin Miaoyu was beaming.

“Do…do I count as gravely wounded?” Pei Jingzhe weakly raised his hand. Cui Buqu had slashed open his shoulder and chest in order to catch the worm, and he was bleeding profusely. The wounds weren’t deep, but they made for an alarming sight.

Feng Xiao’s lips curved into something like a smile. “The fourth rafter, hm?”

Pei Jingzhe looked blankly back at him.

As they spoke, Cui Buqu walked over to the crumpled figure in black. He dropped to one knee and, grabbing a sword, sliced open the heavy cloak and garments bundled around the body. A small bronze jar rolled out.

Cui Buqu extended a hand, but before he could touch it, Feng Xiao caught his wrist. He glanced at Cui Buqu, then snapped his fingers, shattering the jar.

There was nothing inside.

Perhaps the jar had held those worms—since all of them had been used, it was empty. Cui Buqu frowned.

"Venomous worms?" Feng Xiao said curiously. "Who in the jianghu specializes in poisons?"

"Not just poison. It's a gu—one nurtured using the creator's own life. The gu was the base of the array," Cui Buqu said solemnly.

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Many miles away, Kuhezhen spat out a mouthful of black blood.

He unfastened his clothes and looked down at a bloody hole the size of a fingernail that had appeared in his chest. A servant stepped forward to help him and was waved away.

"A-Qi is dead." He sighed softly. "The Central Plains truly abounds with talented individuals. I underestimated them."

Across from him sat Tu'an Qinghe. "I'd like nothing more than a fair fight with Feng Xiao. I ask Your Highness to leave him to me," he said.

"But of course," said Kuhezhen. "Worry not; there's someone out there even more anxious than I am. I'm only playing some small tricks. To borrow a saying from the Central Plains: The water here has already been muddied. I'm just making it muddier." His brows lifted in amusement. When he smiled, his blue eyes seemed to soften, resembling rippling seawater. "I heard the empress is ill."

Tu'an Qinghe was puzzled. "Wasn't she fine when you entered the palace the day before yesterday?"

Kuhezhen nodded. "She fell ill yesterday. It's only appropriate that I should visit to express my concern." He fixed his clothing and stood, brushing dust off his robes. "There's no need for you to accompany me."

Tu'an Qinghe had no objections. He preferred to spend his time polishing his martial arts.

Beckoning his attendants, Kuhezhen swept out the door and left the residence the Sui emperor had provided. He looked up at the sky and muttered to himself, "Ah, a storm is coming!"

The servants beside him also looked up, bewildered. The sky was blue—it was a bright and sunny day.

Chapter 165

ON THE FOURTEENTH DAY of the first month, midnight came silently upon Daxing City. The chickens were asleep, the horses resting in their yards and stables.

"It's cold and windy out. All windows and doors are to be tightly shut!"

Liu San-er's shout echoed in the still night. The night watchman raised a gong, and his companion, Lao-Yang, struck it with a wooden stick.

Dong.

"Lao-Yang, must we keep walking the entire night?"

Liu San-er had recently taken over for his father, who'd served on the night watch for many years before passing away the previous month from a sudden heart attack. Tonight was his first night walking the streets. At first he'd found it novel and exciting, but now he was merely cold and exhausted.

Although it mercifully hadn't snowed, no matter how snugly he bundled himself, the wind found a way to sneak through the tiniest cracks. He was soon miserable and missing the warm blankets in his small house.

Lao-Yang had little patience for the young man's complaints. "Of course!" he scolded. "This is how your father and I did things. This is only your first night—you need to toughen up. You never know what's going to happen. If something comes up, you might end up on lookout duty all alone. You must learn the streets!"

Liu San-er's face fell. "You mean I'll have to patrol alone?"

Lao-Yang tutted to himself. *Such a young lad and already so lazy!* How would he manage to earn a living, marry, and support a family with that attitude? Lao-Yang filled up the silence scolding him.

Liu San-er wasn't normally a patient man, but tonight he remained silent, neither retorting nor showing any irritation. Instead he abruptly asked, "Have you ever experienced anything strange during your time on the watch?"

Lao-Yang had been just warming up to his lecture. "Strange?" he repeated, annoyed by the interruption. "Never!"

"Not even once?" There was something odd about Liu San-er's tone.

"Kid, what are you thinking?" Lao-Yang said, frowning.

Liu San-er pointed. "Look behind you. What's that?"

He instinctively looked back. At a corner not far behind them was a figure in white. Their silhouette was bizarre: Only part of their body was visible, the rest hidden behind the wall. More importantly, they had no head.

Their head was cradled in their hands, its two bloodred eyes fixed on the night watchmen.

All the hair on Lao-Yang's body stood up in terror. He rubbed at his eyes, but the figure was still there—it wasn't a dream.

"R-run! It's a ghost!" He grabbed Liu San-er's hand and dragged him away, dashing through the streets. Though he was a man over fifty, he managed to keep pace with the youth, running with all his might.

At last Lao-Yang couldn't keep going. He stopped and bent over, head between his knees as he gasped for breath. "Quick…report to the constables… No…go to the county office, tell the officials! What a fright!"

"Was it that frightening?" Liu San-er asked quietly.

"You saw it, didn't you? How could you miss that their head was taken off…" Lao-Yang finally realized there was something off about Liu San-er's voice. He looked up, and his soul practically fled his body.

Liu San-er was holding his own head in his hands. He grinned at Lao-Yang. "Was the ghost you were talking about…me?"

Lao-Yang could no longer answer—he had collapsed unconscious on the ground.

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Dawn broke over Daxing City. It was the fifteenth day of the first month—the day of the Lantern Festival.

For the citizens, it was their first Lantern Festival since moving to the new capital. And for Song Liangchen, the deputy chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, it was a very unusual one.

Though Song Liangchen was a deputy chief, her martial arts skills were mediocre at best. She barely qualified as a second-tier expert. But her strengths didn't lie in martial arts—they lay in managing internal affairs. With Song Liangchen at the Zuoyue Bureau, Cui Buqu could focus on more pressing matters without worry.

As a result, she remained comfortably ensconced within the bureau, often spending weeks without leaving its halls.

While most women enjoyed visits to jewelry and rouge shops, she politely declined such outings. Song Liangchen preferred brewing tea, reading, chatting, and playing weiqi—even when there was no one to play with but herself. Unlike Cui Buqu, who frequently fell ill yet enjoyed wandering the world, Song Liangchen was a homebody to the highest degree. A saying had come to circulate within the court: *Inside the Zuoyue Bureau are three eccentrics—an invalid, a recluse, and a fake monk.*

But today was different.

As dawn approached, its light turning the horizon the palest blue, Song Liangchen rose and dressed much earlier than usual. She took a seat facing the door, back straight, as if waiting for someone.

The bowl of plum soup beside her had gone from lukewarm to completely cold before the people she was waiting for finally arrived.

They were travel-worn and weary, covered in frost and snow. Zhangsun Bodhi strode in at the head of the group. Whenever Song Liangchen saw her fellow deputy, she pondered the most serious of questions: Did his bald head feel cold in the winter? She thought it must, because when he removed his hat upon entering, she saw the inside was lined with gray fur.

At another time she might have teased him, but today she kept her peace. Zhangsun's expression was even more solemn than hers.

"He's dead."

Song Liangchen's brow creased, yet she showed no sign of surprise. "Liu Fang?"

Zhangsun nodded slowly. "Liu Fang."

"Cause of death?"

"Suicide."

The furrows in Song Liangchen's brow deepened as she adopted a look of confusion, as if unsure she'd heard properly. "Suicide?"

Zhangsun Bodhi wasn't much of a talker. He echoed, "Suicide."

After a moment of silence, Song Liangchen stood. "I'm going out for a walk."

For someone who so rarely left the house to be moved to stroll around outside was as extraordinary as gold falling from the sky.

"I'll come with you," said Zhangsun Bodhi.

They left. Though no words passed between them, there was no question of their destination. They struck out for the East Market.

This market was the most prosperous area in Daxing City, bustling with taverns and shops. It was said that in the east market, there was nothing money couldn't buy —only prices one couldn't afford.

The capital had just welcomed the new year, and the festive spirit lingered in the air. This morning it was especially heightened—for the three days beginning with the day of the Lantern Festival, the court permitted citizens to enjoy the celebrations without a curfew. From tonight onward, the capital would transform into a vibrant city that never slept, overflowing with light and celebration.

During these days, not only did the court host events for worship, they organized brilliant firework displays for the public to enjoy. On the streets, the people partook in their own lantern riddles, tea ceremonies, singing, dancing, and fire tricks. Many merchants from the Western Regions, caught by the freezing winds and snow, chose to celebrate the new year here before returning home. They seized the opportunity to showcase an array of novelties that complemented the festivities.

Wherever Zhangsun and Song Liangchen went, they were greeted with cheerful smiles.

Noblemen and aristocrats, eager to outdo one another, strove to put on the most ostentatious display as evening drew near. Meanwhile, the common folk were in high spirits. A year's good harvest and the emperor's lenient policies had filled them with optimism. With the curfew lifted, these three nights promised to be even more lively than the celebration of the new year. Although it was early yet, the east market was buzzing with activity, and many had already arrived to enjoy the temple fair.

Song Liangchen nearly lost her shoes in the crowd, while Zhangsun's muslin hat had vanished completely, leaving his smooth head bare and conspicuous. By the time they reached the entrance of the teahouse, Song Liangchen was miserable and exhausted, as if she'd just fought the fiercest battle of her life.

In these days, tea had not yet gained the popularity it would later enjoy, and so-called teahouses offered a variety of drinks and snacks. Next door was a shop selling freshly baked donkey-meat pastries, which attracted long queues every evening. Both establishments served as secret lookouts for the Zuoyue Bureau; the size and variety of the crowds made them prime spots for gathering and relaying information.

All the waiters were in the employ of the Zuoyue Bureau. They recognized the two deputies straight away and ushered them into the inner room. The room was cleverly designed for eavesdropping: Both walls were lined with curtains, isolating its occupants from the crowd while allowing them to clearly hear the conversations of the guests.

"There was another ghost sighting last night!" The speaker was a middle-aged man, his voice rough. From his accent, Song Liangchen guessed he hailed from a small merchant family in a neighboring county and was visiting the city for the Lantern Festival.

"I heard it too! At an entertainment house on the south side of the city, right? Someone saw three headless noblemen, all dressed in white!"

"How do you know they were noblemen? Did you see them?"

"That's just what everyone's saying! Dressed in white and wearing golden crowns—who else could they be? I heard their heads were detached from their bodies, just like you know who—the people who were beheaded in the past."

"Which people?"

"Hey, have you heard the folk song that's been going around the city recently? It goes, 'The willow flowers wilt, the drizzling rain falls, good and evil will reap their own rewards.'"

"You're saying—"

"Shh!"

"Enough about ghosts; it's all just rumors. None of you have seen them. I've got bigger news! Last night, something happened at the Duke of Shu's residence!"

"The Duke of Shu? From the Liu family?"

"That's right. The Duke of Shu, Liu Fang. He died last night! It caused quite a stir: The palace, the Ministry of Justice, the Court of Judicial Review, a bunch of other officials—they all sent people over!"

"How do you know?"

"How do you think? My neighbor delivers vegetables to the Duke of Shu's home."

"Wasn't there also a funeral for the Duke of Shen just the third of this month? Though I heard the duke died of old age."

"Truly? How ominous!"

Voices rose and fell in heated discussion before dropping back to murmurs. It was as if the speakers were shielding a hidden treasure, unbundling it cautiously for their companions to see, wary of outside eyes but unable to stop themselves from boasting.

Zhangsun and Song Liangchen remained silent, listening intently. Only when they confirmed they'd heard everything there was to hear did Song Liangchen heave

a sigh. “Shall we return?”

Zhangsun Bodhi nodded.

The two left their tea undrunk on the table. They’d arrived in a rush and left just as quickly.

The gossip at the teahouse offered little new information, but it confirmed their initial suspicions. Ghost sightings, mysterious deaths, folk songs. A dark undercurrent stirred beneath the surface of the capital.

When they arrived back at the Zuoyue Bureau, Zhangsun Bodhi finally spoke up. “Liu Fang left behind a letter.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” asked Song Liangchen.

“You didn’t ask.”

Song Liangchen sighed. She should have been used to her partner’s methods by now. Unless the one asking was Cui Buqu, Zhangsun would only answer what he’d been asked. His lips were practically sealed shut. “Well, where is it?”

“The Ministry of Justice took it with them. They want to bring it into the palace,” Zhangsun Bodhi said. “But I had a chance to look at it. He only wrote one line. I didn’t know what it meant then, so I didn’t tell you.”

“Then do you know now?”

“Liu Fang’s final message was the last words of that folk song: ‘good and evil will reap their own rewards.’”

Song Liangchen’s heart went cold. “‘The willow flowers wilt, the drizzling rain falls, good and evil will reap their own rewards?’”

Zhangsun Bodhi nodded.

A good folk song had to be simple and straightforward to catch on. The moment most people heard that line, they’d think first of the song.

The willow—*yang*—suggested the Yang family, the royal family of the Sui dynasty. Rain—*yu*—referred to the Yuwen family, toppled rulers of the previous dynasty.

Everyone knew Yang Jian had usurped his son-in-law’s throne to obtain his current glory. In the wake of his ascension, the whole Yuwen family had suffered terrible fates. Almost every single member was deemed a threat and executed. The song transparently alluded to the inevitable retribution awaiting the Yang family, who’d carved a bloody path to the throne.

“On the third of the first month, the Duke of Shen, Li Mu, went mad. He gravely wounded his servant before taking his own life with a sword. To avoid unnecessary speculation, the palace reported he’d passed away due to illness,” Song Liangchen said.

“And on the fourteenth—last night—the Duke of Shu, Liu Fang, hung himself. Then came the rumors of ghost sightings, followed by the spread of this new folk song. The empress had also fallen ill. Both Li Mu and Liu Fang were supporters of the emperor’s ascension.” She turned to Zhangsun Bodhi. “Tell me, do you believe in vengeful spirits?”

Zhangsun rubbed the prayer beads in his hands and murmured a Buddhist chant. “The Buddha resides in the heart. Ghosts reside in the heart as well.”

Song Liangchen was silent a moment. “If only the lord chief was here!” She couldn’t help sighing. “He left Guangqian County so long ago; surely he should be back by now!”

“Hoping I’ll come back and resolve all your troubles?”

Song Liangchen jerked her head around. A figure strolled toward them from the small front courtyard.

He was tall and slender, clad in a simple white cloak. When devoid of expression, the paleness of his handsome face was especially stark. Faint weariness was permanently etched between his brows. But when he smiled, his bland demeanor became as radiant as a solitary red plum blossoming against white snow: illuminating everything around it, leaving no room for any other.

He had grown thinner again, but his eyes were bright—wickedly sharp, like a sword drawn from its sheath, ready to slice through all obstacles. In his presence, no challenge seemed insurmountable. Despite his frail and sickly body, this man could support half the nation on his shoulders.

Chapter 166

THAT DAY AT NOON, Feng Xiao had entered the palace to meet the emperor.

He spotted a few more strands of gray in the Sui emperor's hair than there had been when he left the capital. It had only been three years since the founding of the new dynasty, yet for the first time, Feng Xiao found Yang Jian despondent.

The emperor sighed, confirming his impression. "Yuntian, it's only the two of us here. I often speak frankly to you, so I might as well tell you: I feel overwhelmed."

Feng Xiao arched a brow. "Your Majesty, you manage countless affairs each day. You rise early and sleep late; it's immensely taxing. I urge you to consider getting more rest. If you do, your health will improve too."

Yang Jian was silent a moment. "A new song has been going around the capital. Have you heard it?"

"I rushed here from Luoyang. As soon as I refreshed myself and changed my clothes, I entered the palace to pay my respects. I haven't had the chance to hear any songs."

"'The willow flowers wilt, the drizzling rain falls, good and evil will reap their own rewards.' A few days ago, Li Mu died; last night, Liu Fang also passed away. The empress said she dreamed of someone from the Yuwen family, then caught a cold and has been bedridden ever since." The longer Yang Jian spoke, the more confounded he looked. "What do you think? Does this world truly contain resentful spirits that cannot rest?"

Feng Xiao shook his head. "What one thinks about during the day manifests in dreams at night. A cold is hardly a serious illness, and the empress is a virtuous person blessed by heaven. She's sure to recover soon. As for Li Mu and Liu Fang, I did not witness their deaths and cannot draw conclusions. As for the song, I must speak frankly: Songs and prophecies have existed since antiquity, and are often merely a tool to sway public sentiment. When a dynasty is nearing its end, it's not uncommon to see songs arise amid the competing ambitions of warlords. But Your Majesty has just established a new nation, and your governance is clear-eyed and benevolent. The common folk see this too and are full of hope. Why waste time worrying over these rumormongers? They should be captured and dealt with decisively!"

Yang Jian finally smiled. "Such spirited words. It truly uplifts one's heart. I should have called you back to the capital sooner; I do enjoy listening to you talk."

"Your Majesty needn't dwell on such trivial matters," Feng Xiao replied.

Yang Jian sighed. "When I first ascended the throne, I faced criticism from many old acquaintances—this is something you know well. I've been reflecting. Perhaps I was too heavy-handed with the Yuwen family."

The emperor would never have confided in anyone else like this. But Feng Xiao had long enjoyed this level of familiarity with Yang Jian. The line between ruler and subject was not so stark in private; when they were alone, they resembled old friends.

In truth, it wasn't only Yang Jian who thought he'd been overly harsh. Many others felt he'd gone too far in uprooting the entire Yuwen family. Yang Jian's eldest daughter, Princess Leping, had nursed a grudge against her parents for years over this very thing.

"Perhaps there were some I could have spared, yet I executed them all. Yuwen Chan, for example. The boy was only nine when he abdicated. Princess Leping pled for his life, but still I killed him. It wouldn't have been impossible to spare the boy."

"Your Majesty," Feng Xiao replied, unperturbed, "you mustn't get worked up over these matters. You have always seen things with clear eyes, and this has made you one of the greatest rulers of your generation. If the members of the Yuwen family had been capable men, would they have fallen as they did? The Yuwen family has produced no one of note since Emperor Wu of Zhou. In my opinion, the only exceptional Yuwen since Yuwen Yong is the current Princess Dayi, who resides in the Khaganate."

Yang Jian smiled wryly at his ruthless critique. "You…"

"When a dynasty's time is up," Feng Xiao continued, "a new one will receive the Mandate of Heaven and replace it. When the Qin dynasty fell, the Han replaced them; this is how it's always been. The Yuwen family refused to be replaced, and so they perished. Had the heavens and the people been with them, they would not have. Once a head rolls, it cannot be reattached. Your Majesty has drafted the new Kaihuang Code, which incorporates books and texts from all over the country, compiling and amending them. Compared to these efforts, the remnants of the Yuwen family are insignificant; Your Majesty should act against them without hesitation. Why unsettle yourself over these trivial matters?"

His tone was brazen, yet Yang Jian was amused rather than angry. The conversation had improved his mood significantly, and with his spirits lifted, he regained his usual clarity and decisiveness. "The circumstances surrounding the deaths of Li Mu and Liu Fang are strange. I'll have the Ministry of Justice transfer the case files to you. Investigate discreetly; avoid alarming people."

After a pause, he continued, "And ask Cui Buqu to work with you on the case. The two of you have worked well together in the past—to my surprise, I'll admit. I trust you will also do so on this occasion. The Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus were always at odds before. After collaborating so many times, I trust your views have changed?"

An edge of teasing sarcasm crept into the emperor's tone as he finished speaking. Before Feng Xiao could respond, a palace attendant entered to report that the Prince of Qin had come to pay his respects.

The Prince of Qin, Yang Jun, was the third son of the emperor and empress. He enjoyed neither the special favor nor disfavor of his parents, and his status was neither extremely high nor particularly low. This young man was broadminded but lacked ambition. He acted docile and obedient before the emperor and empress while indulging himself in fine food and lavish entertainments in secret.

Feng Xiao, too, loved to enjoy himself. The two had crossed paths a number of times, to the point that they were comfortably familiar.

The moment the Prince of Qin entered the hall, he threw Feng Xiao a wink. The emperor coughed lightly. "Behave yourself!"

Only then did the Prince of Qin make the proper bows, grinning broadly the whole time. “Your son came to see you, Father. Have you been eating and drinking well these past few days?”

The emperor pinned him with a stare. “Have you been to see your mother?”

“I’ll go see her shortly.”

The emperor sighed. “Your mother has been ill lately; she’s in poor spirits. Make sure you speak kindly to her when you visit. Don’t anger her.”

The Prince of Qin cupped his hands obediently. “Yes, Father.”

When the prince lingered, the emperor prompted, “Anything else?”

The Prince of Qin beamed. “I heard my second brother brought down a deer in the city outskirts yesterday and presented it to you. Since I know you don’t drink deer blood, may I have it?”

The emperor looked as if he would scold him for his indulgence, but he wasn’t in the mood to give a long lecture. “Ask Feng An for it,” he said with a wave, directing him to the attendant waiting outside.

The Prince of Qin was overjoyed. He knelt to express his gratitude, then made ready to leave.

“Daxingshan Temple will hold a Buddhist ceremony the day after tomorrow,” the emperor reminded him. “I will go then to pray for the empress. You must remember to attend as well.”

Many considered the emperor without a single fault save for the fact that he feared his wife. But Yang Jian never forgot that Empress Dugu had supported him through his most difficult moments. When he hesitated, she had dragged him forward. They weren’t merely husband and wife, but close confidants and allies. The emperor had his moments of selfishness, and the couple sometimes quarreled, but to him, a single one of Empress Dugu’s words held more weight than ten of anyone else’s. Seeing her so ill was a heavy blow.

The Prince of Qin promptly agreed. “How could your son forget to pray for Mother? I will put on my finest clothes and pray with utmost sincerity!”

He winked at Feng Xiao again and glanced toward the door, hinting that Feng Xiao should leave with him. Feng Xiao paid him no mind, and so the Prince of Qin had no choice but to leave alone.

“Your Majesty,” Feng Xiao said when he was gone. “Your subject wishes to borrow a painter.”

The emperor started at this unexpected request. “Why a painter all of a sudden?”

Feng Xiao put on his most earnest expression. “Whenever I look in the mirror, I feel my graceful charm must be captured by a master’s brush, lest future generations refuse to believe that such devastating beauty existed.”

The emperor eyed him. He had known Feng Xiao long enough to understand that this was his nature: When the mountains lost their peaks, when heaven and earth united, only then would he give up his vanity.

The two of them gazed at each other for a moment, and the emperor conceded. “There’s an artist in the palace, a member of the Lin family named Shouheng. His

skills are incredible—a match for the most famous of painters. I'll lend him to you. When you're happy with your painting, return him."

Feng Xiao smiled. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

The Prince of Qin had waited half an age outside the palace gates with his bowl of deer blood before he finally spotted Feng Xiao as he emerged.

"What took you so long?" he complained.

Feng Xiao glanced at the bowl. "Bolstering your virile yang energy?"

Yang Jun chuckled. "And you? Enjoy any amorous encounters on this last trip?" he asked.

Feng Xiao thought for a moment and nodded. "I did."

Yang Jun's eyes lit up. "Considering how high your standards are, she must be a stunning beauty. Am I right?"

"What beauty could compare to me?"

I almost forgot what this guy was like! thought Yang Jun. He tried a different approach. "Even if her looks aren't a match for yours, there must be something about her that caught your eye, some allure? When can I meet this person?"

That person… A characteristic smile, thin-lipped and cold, flashed through Feng Xiao's mind. The corner of his mouth curled upward despite himself. "Their allure…lies in cursing people out and scheming behind their backs."

Yang Jun was bewildered.

"They have a heart of stone and a terrible temper. If they suffer even a slight loss, they'll pay it back tenfold."

Dubious, Yang Jun looked him over. "Are you sure you're talking about someone you like and not an enemy?"

"My enemies are all dead." Feng Xiao glanced at him. "This person isn't allowed to die. I want them to live a good, long life."

Yang Jun nodded. "I see now. You don't like the submissive type; you prefer those who challenge you. My friend, that's what we call masochism."

Declining to waste more breath on the prince, Feng Xiao turned away. Yang Jun hurriedly stopped him. "Okay, okay! I won't joke anymore. I have good news: I'm hosting a banquet at my residence tonight for the Lantern Festival. The crown prince and my second brother will both be in attendance. Come join the fun!"

Feng Xiao raised a brow. "Anything new and exciting?"

Yang Jun puffed up with pride. "What do you think? I brought an entire troupe of performers from Kucha for this. There's even a dancing girl—I guarantee her act will blow your mind! You've never seen anything like it!"

"Very well," Feng Xiao said indifferently. "If I'm free in time tonight, I'll join you."

He turned to leave again, and Yang Jun grabbed his sleeve. "You must come! I promised them you'd be there!"

There was a faint curve to Feng Xiao's lips, the ghost of a smile. "Ah, the Prince of Qin had sold me out!"

“Don’t say that,” said the prince with an apologetic smile. “A-Wu is coming too, that’s all.”

“I’ve told His Majesty I have no intention of using Princess Lanling to climb the social ladder,” Feng Xiao replied. “And I have even less intention of becoming a princess’s consort.”

“All right; I understand,” said Yang Jun. “But you’re both unmarried, and you’re such a good match. Surely meeting just for tonight can’t hurt? If you have someone you like, bring her to the banquet; perhaps A-Wu will give up once she sees her.”

The clatter of wheels on the stone behind them interrupted their conversation. Both men turned toward the sound. A carriage bearing the emblem of Princess Leping slowly rolled toward them.

“Dajie must be here with her daughter to visit Mother,” Yang Jun guessed.

But when the carriage stopped before them, the curtains lifted to reveal only the young duchess.

“Why have you come to the palace alone?” Yang Jun asked in surprise. “Where is your mother?”

Duchess Yuwen stepped down from the carriage and performed a graceful bow. “Greetings, Third Uncle. Greetings, Deputy Chief Feng.” Her voice was sweet and melodic. “My mother is unwell herself today, so she sent me to the palace to check on Grandmother. Chief Cui was visiting as well, so Grandmother spoke to me a bit longer than usual.”

Before Cui Buqu had last left the capital, rumors of the empress’s attempts to make a match between him and Duchess Yuwen had run rampant. Many believed that if it were not for the empress’s sudden illness, the two might have been betrothed by now.

“Then did you speak to Chief Cui a bit longer than usual too?” Yang Jun teased.

Duchess Yuwen flushed and shyly dipped her head.

“Did Princess Leping not object to this marriage?” Feng Xiao cut in. “Yet in the span of a single night, Duchess Yuwen seems to have grown fond of Cui Buqu.”

Yang Jun smiled. “You’ve been away from the capital, so perhaps you don’t know. Ying-niang here has been asking us quite a lot of questions about Cui Buqu and the Zuoyue Bureau. After learning of your efforts to reclaim the Jade of Heaven Lake in Liugong City, her attitude toward him changed completely. You know how it is: Beauties always love a hero. Cui Buqu is frail, but with proper treatment, he may very well enjoy a happy marriage and a head of snowy white hair!”

“So that’s how it is,” said Feng Xiao. Before anyone could react, he reached out and brushed Duchess Yuwen’s cheek.

He’d moved quickly, though not as fast as he could. Duchess Yuwen started and took a step back, her sweet voice tinged with indignation. “What are you doing, Deputy Chief Feng?!”

Even if Duchess Yuwen had been an ordinary girl and not the emperor’s own granddaughter, Feng Xiao’s behavior would have been exceedingly forward. But Feng Xiao remained unruffled. “The duchess has a lovely complexion. My hand

moved quite on its own—my sincerest apologies."

If this was flirting, he was the most brazen flirt to ever exist. In broad daylight, in the imperial palace, he'd immodestly manhandled the emperor's granddaughter. But as Yang Jun looked from Feng Xiao to Duchess Yuwen, he suddenly thought that maybe this was a turn of good luck for his niece.

Duchess Yuwen bit her lip. Seeing that Yang Jun made no attempt to scold Feng Xiao, she swallowed her anger and reboarded her carriage without another word.

Only then did Yang Jun return to his senses. He turned to Feng Xiao. "That was far too bold of you. I'm her uncle, you know. Do you think so little of me?"

Feng Xiao smiled. "Of course not. To be honest, just now when the duchess was flustered, she reminded me so much of the person I like that I couldn't stop myself. I'll apologize again when I see her later."

Yang Jun was successfully distracted. Curious, he fired off several more questions about Feng Xiao's beloved.

Feng Xiao answered some of his questions while ignoring others. He shot several contemplative glances at the departing carriage. *That Cui bastard is incredibly sharp. Knowing him, he already picked up on it.*

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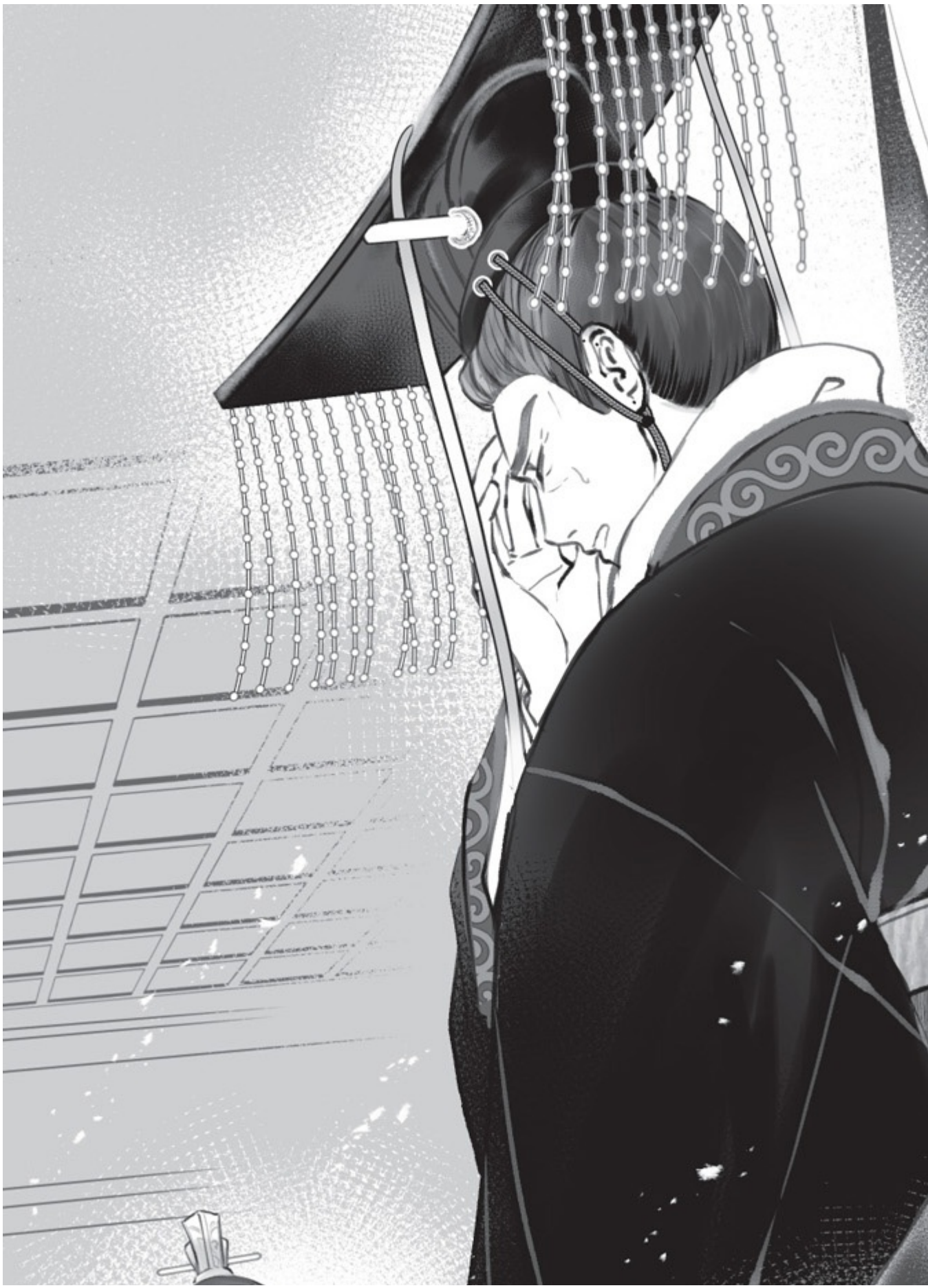
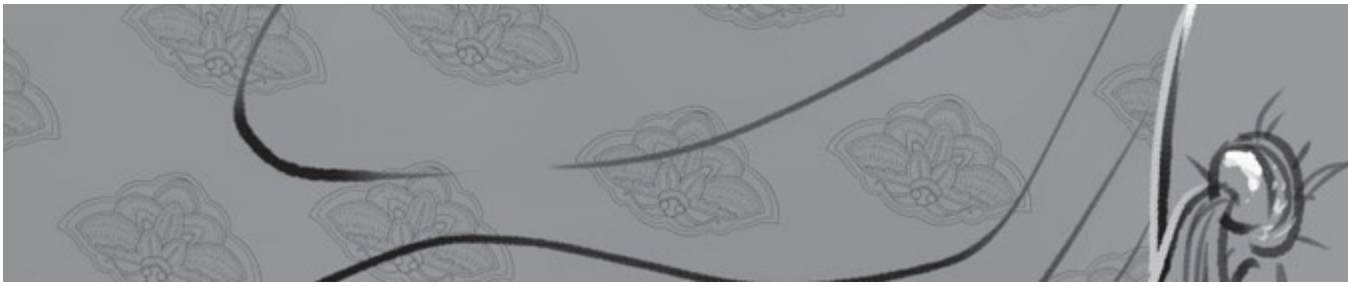
At that very moment, that Cui bastard was still in the palace.

Empress Dugu made up one half of the Two Saints who ruled the nation, and in light of that title, she was one of few empresses permitted to receive subjects within the women's palace. Due to her position and the contributions she made, neither the emperor nor any officials objected.

Cui Buqu was one of her most frequent visitors. Yet now, the once vibrant empress lay sick in her bed, wracked by coughs. It was difficult to say whose complexion was more alarming: hers or Cui Buqu's. Her round face had grown thin; her cheeks were sunken, and dark circles ringed her eyes.





The empress sighed softly. She was a strong-willed person who rarely allowed herself such indulgences, but illness had taken its toll.

“Before, I only suggested betrothing Ying-niang to you as part of the plan you proposed. But my illness has taken a turn I did not foresee. As both your ruler and your friend, I genuinely wish to see this marriage come to pass, so you can settle down and start a family. Tell me, are you willing?”

Chapter 167

ANY OUTSIDER EAVESDROPPING on this conversation would have been astonished at the empress's words. A suitable husband for the princess might be chosen with the consent of the emperor and empress, perhaps with the agreement of the princess herself. Yet the empress was asking for Cui Buqu's willingness—and it seemed if he did not approve, she would set the betrothal aside.

Cui Buqu did not reply immediately. "Does the empress still remember?" he asked after a pause. "In early spring of the first year of the Kaihuang era, you pointed to the flowering trees at the Daxingshan Temple and told me something."

The empress was puzzled, but she considered the question in earnest. "Of course I remember. That tree had been withered for a decade, yet in the first year of the Kaihuang era, it sprang back to life and blossomed with an abundance of flowers. I pointed to the tree and said it perfectly matched the decline of Zhou and the rise of Sui, a sign our Great Sui had received the blessing of heaven and would prosper."

The empress was an intelligent person. As soon as the words were out, she realized why he'd asked. "You suspected I was a fake, so you asked me this to test me?"

Cui Buqu nodded. "Only I heard those words. So you are who you seem."

The empress laughed despite herself. "Then you don't wish to marry Ying-niang? I would never force you. It's only that I saw how reluctant Ying-niang was before, yet now she actively seeks you out. The girl feels something for you. And you—after all these years alone, braving the storms of life, you deserve someone who truly understands and cares for you. I've watched Ying-niang grow up. She has a gentle personality; she isn't spoiled and would never bully others."

Cui Buqu appeared deep in thought. "Has Duchess Yuwen visited the palace often since Your Majesty fell ill?"

"Not often, but not infrequently," the empress replied. "Around the same amount as before. She usually comes with her mother and rarely speaks." By now, she'd noticed Cui Buqu's odd stillness. "What is it? Do you suspect her of something?"

He shook his head. "I can't draw any conclusions yet."

"After you left the capital, I did some probing of my own," the empress admitted. "Aside from a few minor incidents in her childhood, she easily answered almost all the questions. Besides, if something was amiss, her mother would surely have sensed it. The emperor even sent a few spies to investigate; they merely confirmed that she's spent the last two years in the capital, shuttling between the princess's residence and her family estate. She rarely ventures out, let alone to other provinces. In comparison, the daughters of the noble clans in the capital with more vivacious personalities wander much more."

Empress Dugu's health truly had declined. Just those few sentences were enough to fatigue her. A senior maid hurried forward to help her lie down again.

"How long have you been ill?" asked Cui Buqu. "And how did you contract this sickness? What do the imperial physicians say?"

Such questions did not require the empress's direct response, so the maid, Maolan, explained on her behalf. "Not long ago, the eldest princess held a banquet at her residence for her birthday. Her Majesty personally attended. At the banquet, Duchess Yuwen played the qin herself, and Her Majesty was in high spirits. Unfortunately, upon her return, she caught a chill. The imperial physician warned that the cold weather this time of year would hinder her recovery, and impressed upon us the need for proper rest. Despite various medicines and tonics, Her Majesty's condition hasn't shown much improvement. That Her Majesty is plagued by worries about the previous dynasty hasn't helped."

"I am destined to be busy." The empress's tone was self-deprecating. "See how I can never relax—the moment I do, I fall ill. But speaking of Ying-niang playing the qin, that reminds me: She used to dislike such things. Calligraphy, chess, music, poetry—she would cry and fuss before every lesson. Later His Majesty and I became preoccupied with our own affairs and didn't see the girl for a few years. Yet now look at her! She's grown into a graceful and gentle young lady."

She'd been hoping to move Cui Buqu's stony heart with these intimate details about Duchess Yuwen, and it seemed she'd succeeded. He asked with interest, "Has her temperament changed so much from when she was younger?"

"There are of course some differences, but quite a lot happened when she was young. It's not surprising she'd be affected."

The empress spoke around the subject, but Cui Buqu understood. Under the previous dynasty, Yuwen Eying had been a true royal princess, lavishly pampered and exceeded by few in status. With the change of regime, she'd been demoted to the empty title of county duchess overnight, and the noble daughters of the capital who had once fawned over her began to distance themselves. Even when she'd acted spoiled or willful, the emperor and empress had forgiven her, and over time, she'd gradually become more gentle and made a conscious effort not to overstep her bounds.

Though the emperor and empress felt no particular love for Yuwen Eying, neither could they shake the guilt they felt toward her. Yet recently, her personality had become brighter and livelier. The empress attributed it to the first bloom of love and was well pleased with this development.

Cui Buqu ruminated for a moment. "I have no interest in climbing the ranks of the court by marrying Duchess Yuwen. But given these turbulent times, we must exercise caution. I would request that Your Majesty refrain from selecting a suitor for the duchess or revealing my thoughts to her. Allow everyone to think nothing's changed since I returned to the capital, and that Your Majesty still intends to arrange our marriage."

He was still fixated on Duchess Yuwen: Once again, the conver-sation had come back to his suspicions. The empress found this odd, but she understood Cui Buqu was meticulous in his thinking and precise in his speech. He never missed his mark. And currently, he suspected Yuwen Eying. She didn't know what about the girl had drawn his attention, but following his train of thought, she sifted through her memories once more. "There is something you might not know. All those years ago, Daniang gave birth to a pair of twins."

Daniang of course referred to Princess Leping, the eldest daughter of the family. Cui Buqu was quick to catch on. "Both children were girls?"

“Correct,” said the empress. “But one of the babes was born sickly; she died shortly after birth. If not, Daniang would now have an adorable pair of daughters.”

“The little duchess who died—did her name happen to contain the character *huan*, for joy?”

“No…the child died very early. There wasn’t even time to enter her into the genealogy. She never received a name.”

“And did you witness this child’s death?”

The empress sighed. “At the time, Emperor Wu was deeply suspicious of His Majesty. Daniang was the crown prince’s consort. To avoid drawing unwelcome attention to her, I rarely entered the palace. Later, after Yuwen Yun ascended the throne, his behavior grew erratic and cruel; at one point he attempted to have Daniang deposed. We all felt we were living under a sword about to fall, disaster lurking at every turn. I had few chances to meet with her, let alone see the children. Much of what I know about Eying comes directly from Daniang herself.”

She paused. “You suspect the child lives? That seems unlikely. Concealing a child’s existence would be difficult in an ordinary family, let alone a royal one. Besides, Yuwen Yun was the crown prince then. Any child of his would have been a celebrated blessing. What point would there be in hiding her?”

“What if the child was on the brink of death, and a flicker of life was detected just before her burial? What if those overseeing her interment chose to conceal her existence for their own interests? If they seized the chance to smuggle the babe out of the palace, wouldn’t everyone assume she had died?”

The empress was taken aback.

Maolan had served the empress for years and was her confidant as well as maid. She couldn’t resist interjecting: “Chief Cui, forgive my boldness. If the child truly survived, why wouldn’t she return to her family to enjoy the wealth and status of a duchess, rather than hiding her identity and masquerading as her own sister?”

Cui Buqu’s expression remained unchanged. “That’s why this is all conjecture. I’ll be frank: I’ve harbored suspicions about the princess’s residence since the thousand-lantern banquet, but I lack evidence. The culprits are exceptionally patient; they have yet to show themselves, which makes it impossible to investigate. But with these recent upheavals in the capital, perhaps everything will soon be resolved.”

The empress sighed again. This usually astute and decisive woman had never much indulged in a mother’s sentimental sighs. “Daniang has a gentle exterior but a strong core. She keeps many things to herself. Though she refuses to speak of them, I know she nurses her own grievances.”

First a consort of the crown prince, then an empress. To outsiders, her status was one of honor and glory. But Yang Lihua had endured untold suffering thanks to her husband’s fear of her family. Though she was the empress by all rights of legality and propriety, Yuwen Yun had shown her no respect. He’d established four other empresses alongside her, an unprecedented farce.

Yang Lihua had never voiced her feelings, but one could imagine the crushing humiliation she must have felt. She had endured it all until her husband passed, when she finally rose to become the empress dowager with the backing of the Yang family. No longer did she suffer the demands and insults of others. Yet these happier times lasted a scant two years before her father usurped the throne.

Wasn't being a princess a good thing?

Certainly it was—but could it compare to being the empress dowager?

"Whatever you discover, as long as it falls short of treason, please spare her," the empress said with another sigh.

"There can be no exceptions under the law. It is your subordinate's duty to uphold that law, and princes and commoners alike must abide by it," Cui Buqu replied flatly. Even the empress's requests received no special consideration from him.

The empress smiled bitterly. She knew this facet of Cui Buqu's personality better than most; if she'd found it intolerable, she would never have employed him. But since she had, she had to put her faith in him, even in this.

After talking so long, she was finally showing signs of fatigue—her eyelids were drooping with weariness. Ever perceptive, Cui Buqu rose to take his leave, and the empress directed her maid to escort him out.

Maolan had interacted with Cui Buqu on numerous occasions and had long since grown used to his taciturn nature when it came to things not related to his work. She silently walked Cui Buqu all the way to the gates before he suddenly asked, "Maolan-jiejie, do you have any divine ointment left?"

Chief Cui, who never engaged in small talk, had for once in his life initiated a conversation. Maolan was momentarily stunned, then nodded. "I have a few jars. Why do you ask?"

"A gift," Cui Buqu replied.

Maolan was as eager as any to befriend an official who had the empress's absolute trust. "Please wait a moment," she said. "I'll fetch it for you now."

As she hurried away, Maolan's mind was racing. Why had Cui Buqu refused the empress's proposal for such a good marriage? Obviously, he already had someone in mind. Why else would a man like him be interested in cosmetics? His beloved must be more beautiful and exquisite than even the duchess. But Duchess Yuwen had so recently taken a liking to him. If she were to hear of this, it would surely depress her.

Cui Buqu left the palace carrying the divine ointment. Yet the first person he saw wasn't Feng Xiao. Nor was it the Prince of Qin, Yang Jun, who had come to pay respects to his mother. After hearing that Cui Buqu was already inside, he'd waited a long time but eventually left when he realized he wouldn't be able to see her anytime soon.

He instead ran straight into Qin Miaoyu, who was waiting beside the Zuoyue Bureau's carriage, smiling brightly.

Her good mood was hardly surprising. She was supposed to be a spy hidden in the dark, but after their adventures in Guangqian County, Feng Xiao had permitted her to return to the capital, where she could walk in the light again. Working for the Jiejian Bureau here was completely different from lurking in their secret outposts. The latter was hard and thankless work, while the former meant her superiors would see everything she did—which, if she performed her duties well, also meant a faster climb through the ranks.

Thus, though she'd only been assigned as a messenger, Qin Miaoyu carried out her role diligently.

“Chief Cui!” she said, her smile widening. “Is your lordship doing well? Our deputy chief asked me to invite you to our bureau for a chat.”

Cui Buqu glanced at her. “Why didn’t he come himself?”

“The deputy chief was just with His Majesty,” Qin Miaoyu said, lowering her voice. “It seems His Majesty assigned him some task. He wants to ask for your help, but doesn’t want to lower himself to do so.”

“I know what he wishes to ask. Tell him to keep an eye on Zheng Yi.”

Before Qin Miaoyu could process this, a cloth bundle containing several exquisite porcelain jars was stuffed into her hands.

“Eh?” She looked down, and her eyes lit up. “This is the divine ointment you mentioned? You’re really giving it to me, my lord? Oh dear, this is too much. I thought it’d be only one jar, but you’ve given me so many. But I couldn’t possibly decline! That would be disrespectful!”

“One jar is for you,” said Cui Buqu. “The others are for Feng-er.”

“Eh?”

“Don’t tell him they’re from me. Just say they’re your gift.”

Qin Miaoyu was baffled. A slight furrow formed between her brows as she said, “That… That may be a bit difficult for me to say.”

“What’s so difficult about it?” asked Cui Buqu, arching a brow. “Just tell him you’ve admired him for a long time and, in honor of the holiday, wish to express your feelings with a gift.”

But I don’t admire him at all! Qin Miaoyu thought.

“Give them back,” said Cui Buqu. “I’ll have someone else deliver them.”

Qin Miaoyu clutched the jars of divine ointment to her chest. “No, no, I can do it, I promise! Don’t worry about a thing!”

Cui Buqu was unconvinced. “Don’t bring up my name,” he reiterated.

Qin Miaoyu nodded, head bobbing like a chick pecking rice. “Understood.”

But when Cui Buqu turned to board his carriage, she grabbed his sleeve. “Wait! One more thing—the deputy chief wishes to meet you at Luqi Pavilion in the East Market at sunset.”

Feng Xiao’s exact words had been: *I’ll give him a chance to admire my splendor.*

But in Qin Miaoyu’s mouth it became: “The deputy chief misses you dearly and hopes to spend the festival with you. As your lordship knows, he has no friends or relatives in the capital, so he gets quite lonely. Consider it doing a good deed.”

Cui Buqu shot her a glance, a shadow of a smile crossing his face. He neither accepted nor declined, but simply pulled his sleeve away and got into the carriage.

It wasn’t as if Qin Miaoyu could stop him from leaving. She watched helplessly as the carriage rolled away. The jars of ointment, heavy in her hands, left her with a feeling that was difficult to describe, both joyful and anxious. When she thought how Feng Xiao might react, she felt a small headache coming on.

No. It was an immense headache.

Chapter 168

QIN MIAOYU SPENT the journey back to the Jiejian Bureau in turmoil. How could she give the divine ointment to Deputy Chief Feng without mentioning Chief Cui, while also ensuring Deputy Chief Feng didn't misunderstand her intentions?

It was a most vexing problem.

Feng-er was undoubtedly brilliant. Though Cui Buqu had managed to manipulate him on more than one occasion, all this proved was that Cui Buqu's brilliance was even greater. No one dared to underestimate Feng-er's perceptiveness, Qin Miaoyu included. If she didn't want to let anything slip during their conversation, practicing was a must.

By the time she arrived at the rear door of the bureau, it was mid-afternoon. Qin Miaoyu took a moment to compose herself. With the empty air as her audience, her expression changed, and she adopted a joyful and bubbly demeanor. "Deputy Chief Feng, the famous rouge shop at the East Market has a new product called divine ointment. It does wonders for the skin; if you apply it before bed, you're sure to wake up with a radiant complexion. I happened to pick up a few jars as I was passing by—would you like to give it a try?"

She leapt over to face the spot where she'd just been standing, then arched a brow and adopted a deeper voice. "My venerable self told you to extend an invitation to Cui Buqu, yet you went skipping off to the East Market? Does the East Market lie on the way to the Jiejian Bureau?"

This isn't going to work.

After a brief pause, Qin Miaoyu blinked and smiled again. "Deputy Chief Feng, this is divine ointment. I got it from the Zuoyue Bureau; they had more than they needed and kindly shared some with me. This cream will brighten your complexion—would you like some?"

Qin Miaoyu's expression darkened and she scrutinized the jars in her hands. "You brought me the Zuoyue Bureau's trash? Do you take me for a beggar?"

That won't do either.

She took a deep breath and smiled gently, once more addressing the empty air. "Deputy Chief, this divine ointment is a cherished family secret. Regular use will preserve your youthful looks eternally. It's why I look radiant each day. Your lordship works tirelessly from dawn till dusk, so I took the liberty of preparing this for you. Please accept it!"

Qin Miaoyu frowned, curling her lip in disdain. "You call that complexion radiant? It's nowhere near as dazzling as mine. Throw that garbage away!"

I'm doomed!

Stone crunched behind her. She jerked her head around to find Pei Jingzhe staring at her. He'd been so shocked upon overhearing her performance that he'd accidentally stepped on some loose gravel.

"Sorry—I was just passing by," he said, turning to leave.

Qin Miaoyu grabbed his arm. “You came at just the right time! I need your help!”

Pei Jingzhe smiled awkwardly. “I really have to go to the toilet; it’s urgent.”

Qin Miaoyu’s tone was sweet. “Perfect. I’ll wait for you outside.”

“It stinks,” protested Pei Jingzhe.

“I don’t mind.”

Pei Jingzhe cupped his hands and bowed formally. “Qin-jiejie, please spare me!”

Qin Miaoyu frowned. “I’m not asking you to cross a sea of swords or flames!” She thrust the bundle of jars into Pei Jingzhe’s hands—of course, she’d already removed her own. “This is divine ointment. We’ll go see the deputy chief together, and after I finish my report, you’ll take it out and say the emperor decided to gift it to him out of appreciation for his outstanding charm and elegance.”

It wasn’t as if Feng Xiao could go interrogate the empress. And if he figured it out himself… Well, that wasn’t her problem.

Pei Jingzhe looked pained. “No way. I’m bad with words. Our lord will definitely reprimand me.”

“I’ll treat you to the best meal in the capital. You choose the place.”

Pei Jingzhe shook his head, resolute. “I can’t be bought off with petty bribes!”

“Three meals.”

“I won’t be corrupted by wealth,” he declared nobly.

Qin Miaoyu gritted her teeth. “I’ll give you half my salary for this month!”

She had a jar of priceless divine ointment. It was more than worth it.

“Deal!” cried Pei Jingzhe. As if afraid Qin Miaoyu might change her mind, he grabbed the cloth bundle and shooed her inside. “Our lord must be getting impatient waiting for us. Hurry up, let’s go!”

Qin Miaoyu’s lips twitched.

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At three in the afternoon on the day of the Lantern Festival, the weather was balmy and pleasant. Feng Xiao’s mood was anything but.

The deaths of Li Mu and Liu Fang were a frustrating puzzle.

After leaving the palace, he’d gone to the Ministry of Justice to retrieve the case files, then read through the documents as he made his way to the Li and Liu residences.

Old Duke Li had been in his seventies. It was rare to live to such a ripe old age, and despite the bizarre circumstances of his death and the fit of madness he’d suffered before he passed, the Li family had reacted calmly. According to their testimony, Li Mu had behaved normally the day he passed away. Though retired, the duke maintained his habit of reading and writing every day. He’d chatted cheerfully with the younger generation after dinner and expressed his desire to see the lanterns

during this year's festival. Everyone was shocked when he suddenly lost his mind in the middle of the night.

The coroner had examined him and found no trace of poison. Besides, the Li family had all eaten the same food that night; if poison had been the culprit, they'd all be dead.

Liu Fang's death was somewhat less bizarre. Before the Duke of Shu hung himself, he'd been summoned to court, where the emperor had reprimanded him. Liu Fang had supported Yang Jian's usurpation and benefited from it to some degree, yet hadn't received any significant authority under the new dynasty. He was trapped in a high-ranking yet idle position and deeply unhappy about it.

After returning from court, he spent the entire day depressed and spoke little. He dismissed his family and stayed in his study all night, claiming he wished to reflect on his mistakes. Even the servants were sent away. Late that night, however, one loyal servant sensed something amiss. He entered the study and found Liu Fang hanging lifelessly from the rafters, his body already cold.

Li Mu's death was completely out of the blue, while Liu Fang's death had a motive. Yet it was simply too striking a coincidence that both men had died only days apart in the first month. Taken together with the folk songs spreading through the capital and the empress's illness, many began to speculate. Even the common folk came up with a few wild theories.

As Feng Xiao pieced together the various details he'd uncovered, even more questions surfaced. He sank into thought. Only that Cui bastard was capable of keeping up with his sharp mind, but though he waited, Cui Buqu did not arrive.

Instead, it was Qin Miaoyu and Pei Jingzhe who stepped through the door and bowed respectfully.

Feng Xiao's blank face seemed to scream, *Explain yourselves or suffer the consequences.*

All the playfulness Qin Miaoyu had displayed at the rear door had vanished. "Reporting to the deputy chief," she said, solemn. "Chief Cui had pressing matters to attend to and unfortunately could not join me. However, he knows what you wish to ask and advises you to keep an eye on Zheng Yi."

Zheng Yi?

Feng Xiao cocked a brow, his interest piqued. Zheng Yi had been an official under the previous dynasty but retained a significant position in the current one. With the exception of the Yuwen family, Yang Jian hadn't purged any other officials after establishing the Sui dynasty. As long as they did their work honestly, toed the line, and didn't stir up trouble, they were allowed to continue serving.

There were many officials of a similar rank and status as Li Mu and Liu Fang in court—so why was it those two who were dead? Feng Xiao wasn't the only one who'd made the connection: Li Mu and Liu Fang weren't merely former officials, but officials who had been vocal supporters of Yang Jian's ascension. Liu Fang—in collaboration with Zheng Yi—had even forged imperial edicts in service of Yang Jian's coup.

These three men could be seen as founders of the new nation. Their deaths wouldn't only upset Yang Jian; they'd cast doubt on his rightful claim to the throne. Killing anyone else wouldn't have the same effect.

Feng Xiao's thoughts returned to Cui Buqu. The chief of the Zuoyue Bureau served as Empress Dugu's advisor, and his influence with the ruling couple far surpassed that of Liu Fang, Zheng Yi, and Li Mu. But the Zuoyue Bureau was of little renown. Few outside the court had heard Cui Buqu's name; his death wouldn't make the same waves. Or perhaps the enemy lurking in the shadows yearned to eliminate him, but, after several failures, had turned their gaze on others instead.

Liu Fang was dead, but his companion in forgery, Zheng Yi, remained alive. When Feng Xiao had first reviewed these cases, he had forgotten about this man. Now Cui Buqu had reminded him.

Zheng Yi enjoyed crowds and excitement, so he was bound to attend the evening banquet at the Prince of Qin's residence.

Coming to a decision, Feng Xiao gave instructions to Pei Jingzhe. "Find Ming Yue; tell him to send a few men to keep an eye on the Zheng residence. If Zheng Yi leaves, tail him. I want to know whom he meets, what he eats and drinks, where he goes."

Pei Jingzhe quickly assented, then snuck a glance at Qin Miaoyu. Feng Xiao shot him a questioning look.

Steeling himself, Pei Jingzhe placed the bundle on the stone table. "Sir…these are from Qin—ah, I mean, these are a gift for your lordship from the palace. It's a cosmetic called divine ointment—I hear it has miraculous effects on the complexion. His Majesty had it delivered."

Feng Xiao pulled a jar of ointment from the bundle and turned it in his hands. "Is that so?"

For the sake of that half a month of salary, Pei Jingzhe doubled down, growing more confident as the words tumbled out. "After you left the palace, His Majesty instructed an official to bring it to you. They happened to encounter Qin-jiejie at the palace gates and tasked her with the delivery."

Qin Miaoyu laughed drily. How had such a trivial matter grown so complicated? Now even the emperor was involved. She'd been worried that if she failed to follow Chief Cui's directions, she would expose him as the gift-giver. If Feng-er then confronted Chief Cui, she was the insignificant pawn who'd suffer the consequences.

Being a good person is way too difficult!

Feng Xiao scrutinized them for a moment, his expression unreadable. Suddenly he asked in a warm and amiable tone, "Tell me, what do you two think of Qiemo?"

Caught off guard, Pei Jingzhe replied automatically. "Um, it's great!"

Feng Xiao's smile was gentle. "Then why don't I send you both there to enjoy the wind and sand? The northwest border is in need of talented people like yourselves." His expression grew cold. "Lying right to my face, hm?"

Pei Jingzhe's knees almost buckled. He confessed instantly. "Qin Miaoyu made me give it to you, sir! But she wouldn't let me tell you!"

Qin Miaoyu sighed.

Now that it'd come to this, she had no choice but to come clean about Cui Buqu's instructions.

Feng Xiao snorted. “I knew it. Did you really think I wouldn’t guess unless you told me?”

Qin Miaoyu immediately turned on the charm. “Your lordship is so keen and perceptive—this subordinate knew it would be impossible to fool you! But my lord, you know Chief Cui has thin skin and values appearances. He’s afraid you’ll laugh at him if he bares his heart to you. Your lordship didn’t see his expression when he gave me the divine ointment. Such a mix of anticipation and anxiety—he could barely conceal his yearning for you. How could I not be moved when I saw it? That’s the only reason this subordinate agreed.”

Pei Jingzhe listened, dumbfounded. Was she really talking about Cui Buqu? Cui Buqu, filled with anticipation and anxiety? He couldn’t imagine it.

Feng Xiao’s lips curved. “Then tonight he’s sure to come meet me at Luqi Pavilion, correct?”

Qin Miaoyu suddenly found herself unable to speak.

Giving her forehead a poke, Feng Xiao said affectionately, “If he doesn’t show up tonight, you’re heading to Qiemo at first light.”

He swept out of the room.

Qin Miaoyu wanted to cry but had no tears. Pei Jingzhe stealthily slipped toward the door, following Feng Xiao.

“Pei Jingzhe! You stay right there!”

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By five in the evening, dusk had fallen. The moon hung high above the willow branches as people gathered for the festivities. There was no curfew tonight, a rare treat experienced only three days of the year.

The East Market would usually be closed at this hour, but tonight it bustled with activity, a constant stream of people flowing in and out. Lanterns adorned the shops on either side, while the city walls shimmered with scattered lights, as though the stars themselves had descended to earth. The chill of the winter night had dissipated, scattered by the warmth of the packed crowd. In the sky hung the solitary moon, round and red-tinged, as if stained with blood.

Cui Buqu stood before the entrance of Luqi Pavilion.

Guan Shanhai and two members of the Zuoyue Bureau were at his back, all dressed in ordinary garb. After days of recuperation, Guan Shanhai had made great progress toward recovery. He was far from at his best, but more than capable of general bodyguard duties.

Luqi Pavilion had been a famous dining establishment even in the previous dynasty. It was renowned not only for its exquisite cuisine but its fine entertainment, which made it a favored destination among the nobles of the capital. Tonight, the street before the pavilion teemed with people, but many only gave their signboard a cursory glance before walking away. The prices here weren’t something ordinary people could afford.

Cui Buqu gave his surname, and a waiter led him to a private room on the second floor.

The space was walled, with a large window on one side overlooking the streets below. The view was excellent; even from the doorway, Cui Buqu could see everything happening outside. Feng Xiao was already seated cross-legged before the table, casually pouring himself a drink. His demeanor was relaxed as he sampled the dishes already set out. Cui Buqu's eyes went immediately to the jar of divine ointment sitting at his elbow. His lips gave an imperceptible twitch, and he made a mental note to deal with Qin Miaoyu later.

Guan Shanhai and the others took up posts outside the door, and Cui Buqu stepped into the room.

Feng Xiao threw him a dazzling smile as he settled himself at the table, then personally poured him wine and served him with his own hand. "I received quite a special gift today," he said.

Cui Buqu looked back innocently, waiting to assess his opponent's opening move.

"I was awfully touched by the gesture," Feng Xiao continued. "But the person who sent the gift is rather shy. They weren't comfortable approaching me directly and arranged to have someone else deliver it."

Cui Buqu sneered to himself and made another mental black mark beside Qin Miaoyu's name.

"What are your thoughts?" asked Feng Xiao. "How should I express my gratitude?"

"My thoughts," said Cui Buqu slowly, "are that either the giver of the gift is blind, or the recipient is."

Feng Xiao raised an eyebrow. "And here I was thinking that if only he could own up and be honest about his feelings, I might reluctantly consider accepting them."

"He probably regretted sending the gift the moment it was out of sight."

"Why would he?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

They stared at each other, fake smiles etched on their faces. Cui Buqu snorted coldly. "If you've nothing important to discuss, I'll take my leave."

"Zheng Yi," said Feng Xiao. "I've sent someone to keep an eye on him. So far all is well. When do you think they'll strike again?"

Now they were talking business.

Since Feng Xiao had moved on from the ointment, Cui Buqu felt magnanimous enough to offer a few words. After all, this was a matter of national importance. "The day after tomorrow," he said without hesitation. "The seventeenth of the first month. The Buddhist ceremony."

Feng Xiao nodded. "I thought the same. The murders and rumors are merely intended to sow chaos. The more disorder there is in the capital, the better it is for our opponent. Their goal is to undermine the emperor's authority in everyone's eyes. Then they'll attempt an assassination or launch a coup. They must have been plotting

in secret for a long time—perhaps they've even colluded with surviving descendants of the Yuwen clan to exploit the turmoil they'll create. It certainly matches Xiao Lü's style! However," he added, bringing them back around to the beginning, "I have my own doubts about the cases of Li Mu and Liu Fang."

Cui Buqu coughed. "If even the wise Feng-er has no answer to those questions, how could this humble Cui know?"

Feng Xiao didn't beat around the bush. "Daddy."

Cui Buqu choked in surprise, his coughs growing louder.

"We've been through this before." Feng Xiao cocked his head. "If I call you 'Daddy,' you have to agree. You mustn't go back on your word!"

Cui Buqu sneered. "I don't recall saying any such thing."

Feng Xiao's tone was soft and delicate as he drawled, "Daddy, you can't abandon your child like this."

Far too shameless! Cui Buqu thought.

You're only getting what you deserve, Feng Xiao chuckled to himself. Now that Cui Buqu was silent, he could lay out the facts of the case.

Chapter 169

"I'VE SUSPECTED Yuwen Eying for some time now," Cui Buqu said when Feng Xiao had finished.

"Since when?"

"Since the thousand-lantern banquet."

Cui Buqu interacted very little with the imperial granddaughter, but he'd observed her at the empress's side several times. Duchess Yuwen had a gentle demeanor. Put more bluntly, she was introverted, shy, and a poor speaker.

This perfectly described Duchess Yuwen's behavior throughout most of the thousand-lantern banquet—but when Cui Buqu had tried to leave, she had taken the initiative to pursue him. She and her mother had been greatly embarrassed by the scene he'd made, and she'd confronted him over why he hadn't warned Princess Leping before exposing the criminals.

Perhaps *confronted* wasn't the right word. Duchess Yuwen's eyes had been sheened with tears as she bowed and pressed her forehead to the ground. Everyone at the scene had thought Cui Buqu too harsh, so cruel he forced even the emperor's granddaughter to kneel to him. Quite a few memorials criticizing him had landed on the emperor's desk in the aftermath.

It was then that the first thread of suspicion had unspooled in Cui Buqu's mind.

"At the time you said one word," Feng Xiao recalled. "*Strange*."

"That's right. Duchess Yuwen's strategy of attacking by feigning defeat was not only brilliant, it was completely out of character."

Others might not have noted these small details, but after the thousand-lantern banquet, Cui Buqu considered everyone in the princess's residence suspicious. The subtle incongruence in Duchess Yuwen's behavior had therefore caught his eye.

"Ren Yue's scheme at the thousand-lantern banquet was ambitious. Nearly half the capital's nobles fell into his trap. But he was only the princess's lover, not the master of the residence. He shouldn't have been able to command so many people, and he and his collaborators folded too quickly when they were caught. I also found that strange.

"Back at Mount Tiannan," Cui Buqu continued, "Fan Yun warned me. He said there's a greater, more powerful force at court who supports Xiao Lü. When I probed the empress, she confirmed that Princess Leping gave birth to twin daughters. One was born sick and passed away without even receiving a name."

Feng Xiao was silent for a moment. "You're saying Duchess Yuwen's twin sister is alive, and for some reason she's colluding with Xiao Lü?"

Cui Buqu nodded.

"I tested her at the palace gates," Feng Xiao said. "Her reaction resembled that of any ordinary person."

Cui Buqu was as keen as ever; he immediately caught the key word in his statement: *resembled*, not *was*.

Duchess Yuwen was supposed to *be* an ordinary girl, not just resemble one.

"Martial artists react instinctively to danger," Feng Xiao continued, his eyes bright with interest. "I could see it: She wanted to move yet stopped herself to maintain the facade. I touched her face to check for signs of a disguise, but I got a pleasant surprise instead. Her forbearance is commendable."

A former princess, now a duchess. Duchess Yuwen's situation was unique in all of history. She should have been a blessed daughter of the heavens, her hands too soft to carry even a pail of water. Yet it seemed this Duchess Yuwen was a martial artist—and in Feng Xiao's opinion, a decent one.

"But all of this is pure conjecture," said Cui Buqu. "We have no evidence. If we act rashly, we'll frighten the snake off before we can catch it."

Feng Xiao agreed. "All we can do now is investigate the deaths of Li Mu and Liu Fang. Li Mu went mad before his death, while Liu Fang died quietly and even left a suicide note."

"He might not have written the note," Cui Buqu reminded him.

Feng Xiao nodded. "I asked the Li family. They said in the days leading up to his madness, Li Mu had been suffering from excessive heat in his lungs. They called a doctor, who prescribed him medicine for his cough. He took a few doses and saw some improvement."

Cui Buqu narrowed his eyes. "Medicine?"

"Goldthread, isatis root, fish mint, and a few more."

"A bitter ingredient, and another with a strong smell. Very similar to the last case, the—"

"Bowl of silver ear and lotus seed soup at Yandang Mountain Estate?" Feng Xiao finished for him.

Cui Buqu blinked.

Feng Xiao's lips quirked at the corners, then flattened as if the smile had never been. "That soup had a strong smell from the fish maw, and the people of Yandang Mountain Estate suddenly turned mad and killed each other—it is similar. But Liu Fang's death was different. I examined his corpse using the method you taught me. Strangulation marks from hanging should be dark in the center and fainter on either side from the pressure of the noose. The marks on his neck were even. He didn't impulsively take his life after the emperor reprimanded him. He was murdered."

"So perhaps Xiao Lü killed Liu Fang to create a certain narrative," Cui Buqu said, "and right now he's lurking in the dark plotting an even greater conspiracy."

"But Li Mu and the murders at Yandang Mountain Estate, along with the gu array we stepped into, seem to be the work of another hand. Their goal is to—" Here Feng Xiao paused. "Stir up chaos they can benefit from?"

Cui Buqu gazed intently at the woodgrain of the table, his mind focused but his thoughts elsewhere, as if he could see the Eight Trigrams of Fuxi etched within the table's surface. He sat so long Feng Xiao began to wonder if he'd taken leave of his senses, or else hadn't heard him at all. Finally he said, "I suspect the Göktürks."

"Hm?" Feng Xiao's tone invited him to continue.

“The Göktürks are ambitious. They claimed to have submitted, but it won’t last. If an opportunity to strike presents itself, they won’t hesitate to attack. That’s the first reason. The second is that all poisonous gu arts originated within the Pyu city-states. These techniques worked their way through the southwest and up the Yangzte, reaching the Tangut, Tuyuhun, and Khocho peoples. The techniques are well-concealed and poorly understood, and the shamans of the north especially love using them in underhanded maneuvers. And third: The gu poisons and that array only appeared after the seventh prince Kuhezhen arrived in the capital.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “What a coincidence. The Prince of Qin is hosting a banquet at his residence tonight. Kuhezhen should be in attendance.”

Cui Buqu had just drawn breath to reply when he sat up straight and peered down at the street below. Feng Xiao followed his line of sight.

A familiar figure was strolling through the crowd at the entrance of Luqi Pavilion, surrounded by maids who kept pace with her.

Duchess Yuwen.

By now, it was well past six in the evening. The Prince of Qin’s banquet would start at seven. The sea of people downstairs had split into two opposing streams: One headed north to watch the fireworks, the other south to see the lanterns. Duchess Yuwen and her attendants were making their way south. She must have received an invitation from the Prince of Qin, but if she went to stroll the festival now, she’d surely miss the evening banquet.

Cui Buqu rapped three times on the tabletop, and Guan Shanhai pushed open the door and entered. Cui Buqu pointed outside. “Follow Yuwen Eying. Find out where she’s going and report back to me.”

With a swift nod, Guan Shanhai disappeared behind the door.

Feng Xiao got to his feet. “It seems you won’t be joining me at the Prince of Qin’s residence after all. In that case, I’ll take my leave first, lest I miss all the fun.”

“Have a safe trip. No need to see me off.”

Feng Xiao held up the jar of divine ointment and waggled it in front of Cui Buqu. “Do you really not know who sent this? If you don’t, I’ll throw it away.”

Cui Buqu ducked his head and began to eat, as if he’d only just realized there was an exquisite feast laid out before him.

Feng Xiao sneered and shoved a folding fan into Cui Buqu’s hand.

Cui Buqu frowned. He held it loosely, as if it might burn his fingers.

“No throwing it away!” Feng Xiao warned.

“I heard there used to be a saying about gifting fans as tokens of affection. I never imagined Deputy Chief Feng harbored such deep feelings for me.” Cui Buqu eased the fan open. His lips twitched, and he was unable to say another word.

On the spread fan was a portrait of a tall and ethereal figure standing on the banks of the Yellow River, facing the water. The subject was none other than Feng-er.

He really did want to throw it away. “Qin Miaoyu said you entered the palace to ask the emperor for a painter. Was it to paint this thing?” he asked, voice rising with incredulity.

Feng Xiao leaned forward and spoke softly into his ear. “Since you gave me the divine ointment as a token of your affection, I had to repay you with something even more precious. I thought it over carefully: Why, the most precious thing in the world is myself. Since it’s impossible for you to see me whenever you like, now you can look at my portrait to console yourself. It’s nearly as good as the real thing.”

Before Cui Buqu could erupt in rage, Feng Xiao beat a swift retreat. Pulling the little jars close to his chest, he strode out with a bright laugh.

Cui Buqu was so affronted his hair stood on end. He reached out, ready to tear the fan to pieces lest Feng Xiao grow even more gleeful. But when he glimpsed the painted surface, his hand stopped of its own accord.

The court painter really was an artist of incredible skill. The figure on the fan was lifelike, almost ready to leap off the paper. After a moment, Cui Buqu discreetly tucked the fan away.

Not long after Feng Xiao took his leave, Guan Shanhai returned with his findings.

“Lord Chief, she continued south. After exiting the city, instead of going to see the lanterns, she sat alone at Liuying Pavilion. She was still there when I came back to report. To avoid alerting her, I dared not get any closer and left Wang Jiu to keep watch instead.”

Cui Buqu frowned in silence for a while. “She noticed you.”

Guan Shanhai was taken aback. “Impossible,” he blurted. “Your subordinate kept his distance…”

“I’m not blaming you.” Cui Buqu waved a hand. “Liuying Pavilion sits atop a rocky hill, surrounded by open space. It’s far from the festival, so crowds are unlikely to gather there. And it’s winter—the trees are bare and offer no cover. As long as the people with her paid attention, they were sure to notice you. It’s also possible she went there on purpose and was waiting for you to approach.”

“On purpose?” echoed Guan Shanhai.

Cui Buqu nodded. “She’s waiting for us to willingly take the bait. Come, let’s go and play the fish tonight.”

He rose and led Guan Shanhai and the others out.

Guan Shanhai noticed the new folding fan in Cui Buqu’s hand. Though puzzled, he wasn’t one to poke his nose into other people’s business. He stuck to his duties, never asking any more questions than necessary.

Cui Buqu suddenly stopped. “Later, when you have the time, go inquire about when the Jiejian Bureau plans to return the painter they borrowed from the court.”

“Understood.”

Chapter 170

FENG XIAO HAD LEFT their rendezvous alone. He was merely going to the Prince of Qin's residence for a banquet, after all, not bursting in on a den of tigers and dragons.

When Cui Buqu set out, he sent someone back to report to the Zuoyue Bureau. By the time he and Guan Shanhai reached the city's southern gates, Zhangsun Bodhi was waiting for them, Qin Miaoyu at his side.

"Lord Chief," she said, stepping up to greet Cui Buqu. "The deputy chief told me to go with you."

Cui Buqu nodded, wasting no words. He never shrank from risking his life to obtain the advantages he needed, but there was no reason to act recklessly. With Zhangsun and Qin Miaoyu present, even if they encountered Xiao Lü, they could most likely escape with their lives intact, if not fully unscathed.

Xiao Lü had been gravely wounded during their last battle—Feng Xiao had said so himself. If Xiao Lü hadn't pushed himself through qi deviation to improve his martial arts since they'd last seen him, his injuries wouldn't be fully healed. A sick tiger was a tiger still, but weaker by a fair amount.

The common folk milled about the streets, resolved to celebrate all night. Normally, most would have already blown out their lamps and retired to bed, but now, lanterns in hand, they bustled along with festive energy. From a distance, they resembled a long, sinuous dragon flickering with firelight. Cui Buqu and his party exited the city gates but didn't follow the crowd to the lanterns. Instead, they turned toward Liuying Pavilion.

Lanterns dotted the pavilion's exterior, revealing the half-seen silhouettes of guards. Inside sat a solitary figure, fanning themselves as they brewed tea over a small stove. Sparks sputtered from the flame. The faint aroma of tea wafted over, mingling with the fragrance of savory snacks roasting beside the pot.

Zhangsun Bodhi stopped Cui Buqu before he could step forward. "That's not Duchess Yuwen."

Indeed it was not. The shadowed physique clearly belonged to a man, and one as exceedingly meticulous with his appearance as Feng Xiao at that.

Cui Buqu was unperturbed. "Let's go. Come with me to meet the leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, Pavilion Leader Xiao."

Qin Miaoyu and Guan Shanhai were both stricken. Once again, their fears had become reality. They weren't so frightened they'd turn tail and run, but the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai had stirred up trouble again and again—from Liugong City all the way to Guangqian County. Qin Miaoyu and Guan Shanhai had both almost perished at their hands more than once. For the members of both the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus, Xiao Lü was an object of terror.

They weren't being stealthy, and they hadn't lowered their voices. Naturally, the occupant of the pavilion noticed them at once.

"It's cold and windy out there," a voice called out. "Why not step inside for a chat with an old friend, Cui-xiansheng?"

Neither Qin Miaoyu nor Guan Shanhai had faced Xiao Lü themselves, but they'd witnessed the battle between him and Feng Xiao that night at the tavern. The two had been evenly matched; Feng Xiao had barely managed to tip the odds to achieve his victory. Even then, it was only thanks to Feng Xiao's immense good fortune that he'd survived the qi deviation that followed. If he hadn't, who knew what the Jiejian Bureau would look like now?

Then there was their mission in the Khaganate, in which Yuxiu had disguised himself as Apa Khagan—a trip that had nearly turned into a catastrophe. And Boling Commandery, where Yuan Sansi had approached Cui Buqu under the guise of an old acquaintance, then lured him into a trap at Mount Tiannan that almost cost Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu their lives. Most recently, in Guangqian County, Xiao Lü had exploited the floods and fanned the flames, secretly orchestrating everything from the shadows.

Each time they thought the Thirteen Floors had exhausted their elite forces and been rendered impotent, Xiao Lü managed to send them another pleasant surprise. Guan Shanhai couldn't shake the thought that, had they not come up against Cui Buqu, the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai would have succeeded in their schemes by now.

Qin Miaoyu had even more reason to fear them. She'd once been a disciple of the Buyeo Sect, subordinate to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. Xiao Lü had effectively been her highest superior. She'd been an insignificant, nameless lackey, so Xiao Lü probably wouldn't remember her. Still, her nerves strained taut and her heart pounded as she followed Cui Buqu into the pavilion.

Fortunately, Xiao Lü paid her no mind. He spared scarcely a glance for Cui Buqu's companions before focusing his entire attention on Cui Buqu, as if only he was worthy of Xiao Lü's regard.

"To reunite with an old friend on a chilly night, brewing tea and discussing the Dao—is this not a most pleasant way to pass the time?" Xiao Lü's clear and melodious voice drifted toward them, as soothing as branches bursting into fresh green life after a bleak winter.

No one dared let their guard down save for Cui Buqu, who responded pleasantly, "Pavilion Leader Xiao, you used County Duchess Yuwen's likeness to draw me here. Are you not worried? I only need to give a single order, and His Majesty will send the imperial army. Your martial arts may be unmatched, but escaping with your life would be quite the challenge."

Nevertheless, he sat in the seat Xiao Lü indicated, settling down across from him. Cui Buqu reached for a freshly poured cup of tea, filled almost to the brim, and raised it to his nose. "Good tea."

Xiao Lü's eyes sparkled with delight. "It is indeed good tea; I brought it specially from the south. I knew you'd like it."

He'd made many attempts on Cui Buqu's life from afar, but now that he was before him, he was all smiles, without any hint of hostility. An observer might have thought the two close friends who'd known each other for years.

Qin Miaoyu watched anxiously, worried Cui Buqu would be entranced by Xiao Lü's amiable tone and drink the tea. But it seemed she'd vastly underestimated him: Cui Buqu flipped the cup and dumped the tea onto the ground beside him.

"I toast not with wine, but with tea. I honor those who have fallen victim to Pavilion Leader Xiao's schemes over the years. May they never find peace in the underworld; may the day come when they return to seek their vengeance."

Qin Miaoyu barely stifled a laugh. She snuck a glance at Zhangsun Bodhi. The man seemed to be in a trance—he stood motionless as a wooden statue, apparently oblivious to the conversation taking place before them.

Cui Buqu coughed lightly. “As I’m sure the pavilion leader knows, my health has never been good. I can only endure the cold winds for so long. Allow me to get straight to the point.”

Xiao Lü smiled. “My apologies. It’s remarkable you’re still breathing after such continuous torment; I nearly forgot you’re suffering from a chronic illness.”

“Are you aware of the massacre of the Lin family from Yandang Mountain Estate? Fifty or so deaths.”

“I am aware.”

“Did you receive the message I asked Ning Shewo to relay to you?”

“I did.”

Cui Buqu’s brow furrowed faintly. “Yet judging from your attitude, Pavilion Leader Xiao, you have no desire to cooperate.”

Xiao Lü sipped his tea, only speaking again when the cup was empty. “Lin Yong was indeed a member of my Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, but he must have revealed quite a bit of information since falling into your hands. Regardless of who perpetrated the massacre at Yandang Mountain Estate, I don’t see why it should have been under my protection. Do you disagree?”

“Pavilion Leader Xiao, if you aspire to build a legacy that will endure for generations, it would be prudent to avoid making such shortsighted remarks.”

Xiao Lü smiled. “Then tell me, what should I say instead?”

A sense of unease washed over Cui Buqu. From the beginning, Xiao Lü’s responses had been strange. Although Cui Buqu and the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai were at odds, the Göktürks were a common enemy. They should have been able to collaborate just this once. But judging by Xiao Lü’s expression—

It hit him at once. “Are you collaborating with the Göktürks?!”

***

Feng Xiao strolled toward the Prince of Qin’s residence in the north of the city, a smile tugging at his lips as he considered whether or not Cui Buqu would throw away the fan.

He concluded it was unlikely. Feng Xiao knew that Cui bastard’s personality all too well. He acted detached and unconcerned, but in reality, he was ensnared by Feng Xiao’s charms and unable to break free.

He tossed the jar of divine ointment into the air, letting it land gently back in his palm, then hummed softly in amusement.

What a faker!

As Feng Xiao waded through the streams of festivalgoers, a man appeared ahead. He didn’t move with the crowd, but quietly observed Feng Xiao from within its midst. Though he blocked the way, none of the surrounding civilians reprimanded him. They were oblivious to his presence, as if they couldn’t see him at all.

Only a martial artist of exceptional skill could hide their aura in such a bustling marketplace. Feng Xiao stopped and narrowed his eyes. Without warning, he sprang

up onto the nearest rooftop, then made his way north in a series of leaps, eventually touching down in an empty alley.

He turned to glance back. The man had followed him, silent as a whisper.

"Who are you?" Feng Xiao asked.

"Tu'an Qinghe."

"Never heard of you."

"This is my first time in the Central Plains."

As Feng Xiao observed Tu'an Qinghe, his opponent was evaluating him in turn. Someone like Feng Xiao was destined to dazzle wherever he went, but his martial arts rarely made a splash in the jianghu. His milieu was the court, and his victories there were the source of most of his acclaim. Tu'an Qinghe had originally set his sights on the martial experts ranked highest in the jianghu's listings—but upon seeing Feng Xiao, he'd changed his mind.

The martial prowess of the leader of the Jiejian Bureau was on par with that of any master of the jianghu. In fact, Tu'an Qinghe suspected Feng Xiao's true capabilities might be even greater than he imagined. Superficially, Feng Xiao resembled a phoenix taking flight—blindingly brilliant. His captivating, flamboyant exterior would make it easy to underestimate his martial arts. Yet beneath the flash of his magnificent plumage lay an unfathomable well of power.

The clamor and bustle of the surrounding streets drifted into the alley. Tonight, the capital was bright with lanterns. But in this narrow space, swords were drawn and arrows nocked.

The freezing wind seemed to solidify, becoming ice that surrounded them both. It stretched out wispy fingers from the pale walls on either side, until the air seemed to crackle with frost.

Feng Xiao gave a cold *hmph*.

Like a fissure cleaving through a glacier, the sound broke through the chill and rushed like the wind toward Tu'an Qinghe, who was forced a half step back. It was only half a step of ceded ground, yet it seemed to span the heavens as Feng Xiao swept forward with unstoppable momentum.

"I do not fight with nameless individuals!" he sneered, striking out with his palm.

Tu'an Qinghe fell back effortlessly, body drifting like a leaf. Feng Xiao pressed forward, and Tu'an Qinghe continued to withdraw. But there was no surrender or compromise in this retreat—it was a calculated maneuver.

When he could retreat no further, a cold glint flashed in his sleeve. A strange, single-edged saber appeared in his hand, as slender as a sword. Tu'an Qinghe spun and rushed forward with the blade in hand.

One glance was enough for Feng Xiao to guess the origin of his skills. "So *you're* that disciple of Hulugu's!" The former Göktürk grandmaster's martial arts were distinct and highly recognizable. Feng Xiao had crossed paths with Fo'er too many times not to recognize them. But if Fo'er's skills had the quality of an offshoot branch, Tu'an Qinghe's were clear and profound, as free from impurities as the snow atop the highest peak of the Tian Shan range.

Tu'an Qinghe claimed he'd never set foot in the Central Plains or traveled through the jianghu, and Feng Xiao believed him. Everything about him, from his gaze to his martial techniques, was pure and unblemished. It was as if he existed in a world where only he and his opponent remained. Even if the sky were to collapse and the earth split apart, even if storms raged and seas roared, Tu'an Qinghe would remain cool and unfazed.

The saber in his hand was as steady as a mountain, while he himself dissolved into a fleeting rainbow. Wherever that arcing rainbow touched, frost gathered, swiftly crystallizing into an icy fortress that enveloped Feng Xiao and stifled even his breaths.

Feng Xiao had no sword. The wide sleeves of his robe soared outward, and two strings flew from his sleeves. Where they touched, the ice shattered, and the fortress of frost collapsed. In a blink, those strings like blades of wind and light were inches from Tu'an Qinghe's brow.

Of the two ancient zithers, Raoliang and Yuyin, Raoliang had been destroyed. Only its sister, Yuyin, remained. Yet Feng Xiao had plucked its strings to use as weapons. It went against all reason. He'd dismantled a priceless treasure; anyone who cherished zithers would have spat blood in rage. But Tu'an Qinghe merely looked grave. He saw them not as two strings but as a technique capable of countering his saber arts.

He'd spent five years of study on the move he'd just used and deemed it flawless. Though Feng Xiao's strings hadn't destroyed his killing technique entirely, he'd freed himself from the trap. If Tu'an Qinghe wished to come out of this fight intact, he'd have to change tactics.

As the strings clashed with the saber, energy exploded around them. The dark stone of the road cracked beneath them, while fissures split the walls on either side. If they hadn't been holding back, the walls and even the buildings themselves would have collapsed in on them.

The two had no desire to perish together. In the wake of the impact, both drew back a safe distance.

"Now will Deputy Chief Feng acknowledge me as a worthy opponent?" asked Tu'an Qinghe.

"Just barely," said Feng Xiao. It was hopeless to expect any honest words from this man.

Tu'an Qinghe's expression grew serious. "This isn't a suitable place for a battle. If we meet again, I hope to have a fair fight."

"Return and tell your seventh prince to keep himself in check," Feng Xiao replied. "Even if he has the support of the entire Göktürk army, I won't hesitate to kill him."

He reached instinctively for his fan, only to recall that he'd given it to Cui Buqu. Feng Xiao made a moue of disappointment. "My venerable self shall take my leave. No need to see me off." He was already yards away when he added, "Oh, and you'll pay for all the tiles and walls you destroyed. I'll send someone to the seventh prince's residence to collect payment later."

"Deputy Chief Feng!" Tu'an Qinghe took a step forward, but the rest of his words died on his tongue. He was left watching Feng Xiao drift into the distance.

After standing a moment in silence, he turned and sped back to the seventh prince's residence.

Upon the prince's arrival in the capital as a hostage, the emperor of Sui had provided him with a manor and conferred on him the title of a Han prince as a demonstration of his sincerity. But regardless of his title, the prince was a Göktürk; he didn't fit in with the nobility of the capital. He hadn't gone to the banquet, nor had he headed out to see the lanterns or fireworks. Instead, he stayed in his residence to read.

Kuhezhen had a deep interest in the culture of the Central Plains. He preferred to remain alone most days, sending his attendants out to collect famous literature and anecdotes from the marketplace. The emperor was pleased to see him assimilating into their culture and occasionally rewarded him with books as gifts.

He raised his head from his book as Tu'an Qinghe stepped into the room. A small smile played on his lips. "Finished?"

Tu'an Qinghe didn't return his smile—his expression was chilly. He remained motionless, as if in silent protest.

Kuhezhen was unfazed. "There are countless masters in the Central Plains; what is one Feng Xiao? You have far more formidable opponents ahead of you," he said gently.

"I've repaid the favor I owed you. I won't assist you in this matter again," said Tu'an Qinghe.

Kuhezhen was not at all offended. He nodded earnestly. "Of course. This was more than enough, and I won't trouble you again. The Lantern Festival is a grand celebration for the people of the Central Plains. If you don't wish to enjoy the festivities, why not join me for a meal? I've asked the kitchen to prepare a lamb hot pot."

Tu'an Qinghe acted as if he hadn't heard him. He turned and left without a word.

This did not trouble Kuhezhen; he was in an excellent mood. Still smiling, he looked down at the book in his hand. It was the ninth volume of *The Garden of Eloquence*, by Liu Xiang of the Western Han dynasty.

In the garden stood a tree. A cicada perched high on a branch, lamenting softly as it sipped dew, oblivious to the mantis lurking silently behind it. The mantis stalked the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind it.

Kuhezhen's smile deepened.

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The confrontation between Feng Xiao and Tu'an Qinghe lasted no more than a quarter of an hour. After parting ways, Feng Xiao continued toward the Prince of Qin's residence to join the banquet.

The entrance bustled with carriages, while a din of voices spilled from the open doors. Feng Xiao was one of the last to arrive, and the residence was already full of guests. He'd come alone, without servants or attendants, but anyone who'd glimpsed his iconic and dazzling appearance even once was unable to forget it. Very quickly he

was recognized, and a steward approached with a smile.

In a nod to the rules of propriety, the Prince of Qin's residence was of a modest size. In order to expand it, Yang Jun had purchased several neighboring properties and renovated a garden suitable for hosting banquets. The imperial censors had reprimanded him for it, but his actions, while unbecoming, weren't truly out of line. The emperor and empress had chosen to overlook it.

Perhaps his attendants had taken inspiration from Princess Leping's thousand-lantern banquet, because the Prince of Qin's residence was also decorated with lanterns of all sizes. Tonight, however, they were wrapped in semi-transparent gauze. The iridescent fabric shimmered in a rainbow of hues, lending the light a mercurial, otherworldly quality.

"This way, please, Deputy Chief Feng. The third prince has been eagerly awaiting your arrival; he's asked after you several times!" As the steward leading the way turned to speak, he saw Feng Xiao abruptly halt in his tracks.

He was staring at the back of his right hand.

Nearby, a green-gauze-wrapped lantern flickered. In the dim light, his hand looked smooth and perfectly normal. Perhaps it was just an illusion.

"Deputy Chief Feng?" the steward asked, confused.

"Go ahead." Feng Xiao let his hand fall and strode after the steward.

They reached Fuxue Pavilion, a name that meant *snow-covered*. But there was no snow here tonight, only another abundance of lanterns. Within, a lovely woman was dancing. Her costume was a crimson as vibrant as blood, her hair elegantly styled with golden pins and her sleeves billowing around her like wraiths.

She leapt from the pavilion to the center of the pool, her toes grazing the surface as her skirt swirled and whipped above the water. White mist drifted over the pool, curling around her body and refusing to release its hold, as if she was walking among the clouds above the sea.

Upon close examination, Feng Xiao spied the stones just beneath the water's surface. The beauty's bare feet pranced over them, her lithe and effortless movements creating the illusion that she walked upon the water. The guests stood beneath the colonnade and beside the rockery, transfixed.

Yang Jun sidled over, beaming with pride. "How is it? I told you there'd be surprises tonight. If the girl's caught your eye, I'm willing to give her up!"

"No need," said Feng Xiao. He turned smoothly to greet Princess Lanling, who had arrived at Yang Jun's side. "Good evening, Your Highness."

The princess smiled back. "Deputy Chief Feng is as radiant as ever. Something good must have happened. What is it? You mustn't keep it to yourself!"

Yang Jun threw Feng Xiao a knowing wink. "The crown prince and Erge are here too. I'll go greet them; the two of you keep chatting."

He sauntered off, leaving Princess Lanling and Feng Xiao together.

"Your Highness has sharp eyes," said Feng Xiao languidly. "I was just thinking of my beloved."

The princess's smile faltered. Suddenly she couldn't seem to breathe properly. She twisted her trembling hands and forced her lips back into a smile. "Deputy Chief Feng is a man of great talent. The one you admire must be extraordinarily beautiful."

“The princess is a beauty capable of causing fish to stop swimming and geese to fall from the sky. In this regard, Your Highness is a thousand times better than my beloved. And Your Highness has a kind and empathetic heart, making you even more superior.”

“Then—” Princess Lanling bit her tongue, swallowing back the words *Why do you like her and not me?*

She hadn’t forgotten she was a daughter of the emperor. Even if she was disappointed in love, she couldn’t bring shame upon the imperial family.

But Feng Xiao seemed to sense her question. He continued smoothly, “But for some reason, I still find them charming. Even when they throw tantrums, even when they’re concocting schemes, I find them remarkably endearing. And without me around, their time may be limited—to ensure their survival and keep them on their toes, I must keep a close watch.”

The princess fell silent. After a moment, she said softly, “I understand. Finding true affection in this world is difficult, and love is rarer still. Congratulations, Deputy Chief Feng.”

Feng Xiao took no special care with the princess’s feelings. He laughed. “Your Highness, you’re a blessed daughter of the heavens. How many exceptional men yearn for your attention? I fear I don’t possess such good fortune.”

Princess Lanling smiled bitterly. She was indeed a blessed daughter of the heavens, but it was that very fact that made genuine feeling all the more elusive. How many truly desired her for herself, rather than for her status? She still found it difficult to accept.

“May I know the name of Deputy Chief Feng’s beloved?” she asked, but was met with only silence. She turned. Feng Xiao was gazing at something in the distance. Princess Lanling followed his line of sight but saw nothing unusual. “Deputy Chief Feng?”

“I’ve just spotted an old acquaintance; I should go greet them. Please excuse me, Your Highness.”

He strode forward as he spoke, and soon disappeared around the corner of the colonnade.

Feng Xiao had spotted Xiao Lü.

Though he’d only caught a glimpse, he couldn’t be mistaken. The two of them had given their all in the battle that night, dancing along the boundary between life and death. But why would Xiao Lü have snuck into the Prince of Qin’s banquet? He must have ill intent. Half the nobles in the capital were present tonight. Even the crown prince and the Prince of Jin were in attendance. If anything happened, the consequences would be dire.

Feng Xiao quickened his pace.

The distance between them shrank rapidly. Xiao Lü seemed to realize he was being watched. He sped up his own movements until he was using qinggong capable of crossing vast distances in only a few steps.

Just as Feng Xiao came within reach, Xiao Lü turned and struck out at Feng Xiao with his sword. Feng Xiao sidestepped and grabbed for Xiao Lü’s wrist. But Xiao Lü was an exceptional martial artist. He might be injured, but he wouldn’t be captured so easily. He slashed again, this time toward Feng Xiao’s abdomen.

Feng Xiao bent his knee to block the blow and struck the acupoint on Xiao Lü's arm. The sword dropped from Xiao Lü's limp fingers, and Feng Xiao snatched it from the air and turned it on its owner.

In the moment Feng Xiao lunged forward, a strange smile appeared on Xiao Lü's face.

No!

Something was wrong… Everything was wrong. The pale lanterns illuminated the colonnade, casting a soft yellow glow. But their reflections in the water shone a ghastly green.

Feng Xiao wrenched to a stop, the sword inches away from piercing skin—yet Xiao Lü grabbed the blade and stabbed it into his own body.

A surge of iron filled Feng Xiao's mouth as he bit down on his own tongue. The fuzzy sounds of singing and dancing ebbed away like a retreating tide, replaced by ear-piercing cries and screams. The smell of blood permeated the air, stronger than the taste in his mouth.

Feng Xiao looked around.

Xiao Lü—

There was no Xiao Lü at all.

The ground was strewn with victims bleeding onto the lantern-lit paths. Cries for help echoed all around. Among the injured were the Prince of Jin and the Prince of Qin, lying unconscious, on the edge of death. The crown prince, soaked in blood, had collapsed on the ground. When he saw Feng Xiao's eyes fixed on him, he shrank back desperately and gave a hoarse shout. "Help! Guards! Guards! Feng Xiao's gone mad!"

Chapter 171

THE NIGHT DEEPENED, the chill growing sharp teeth. The embers within the small stove flickered feebly as they neared the end of their life. An occasional gust swept past, forcing them to struggle valiantly for survival. The wind howled, wild and arrogant as it blew from all directions, slipping into the gaps in the sleeves and collars of the two men facing each other inside the pavilion.

One wore a serene expression.

The other's face was hard and cold.

Xiao Lü was unfazed by Cui Buqu's question. He chuckled. "Cui Buqu, you've always been clever, so why does this surprise you? You can invite me to collaborate, but I can't cooperate with the Göktürks?"

Cui Buqu studied him. A moment later, his coldness faded into indifference, all traces of anger wiped away. He nodded in agreement. "You're right, Pavilion Leader Xiao. That was rude of me."

Xiao Lü had to admire Cui Buqu's composure. Anyone else would have exploded at being summoned here and toyed with like this. Yet Cui Buqu managed to suppress his anger and regain his calm. All signs of turmoil ebbed from his face, dissipating completely. Even Xiao Lü was unable to decipher his true feelings.

But just because Cui Buqu maintained his composure didn't mean those with him could do the same. Guan Shanhai could no longer contain himself. "We and the Göktürks will never be of one heart. No matter what, you are a Han, yet you've conspired with a foreign nation to sow discord in the Central Plains!"

"I'm from the Southern dynasty; I'm not a citizen of your Great Sui," Xiao Lü said mockingly. "Besides, you're not at war with the Göktürks now—you've just granted titles of nobility to their seventh prince. Aren't you allied with them too?"

Guan Shanhai's face was white with rage, but he managed to hold himself back. He dared not act without Cui Buqu's orders.

Xiao Lü turned back to Cui Buqu and smiled. "Your companions aren't noteworthy fighters, but they're far more loyal than mine."

"You brought me here tonight to create an opening for Kuhezhen," said Cui Buqu coolly. "What are you scheming now?"

"I am here," said Xiao Lü, "to issue you a challenge. Do you dare accept it?"

There was no hostility in his eyes—the opposite, in fact. His gaze was tranquil. Xiao Lü had always believed Cui Buqu was the person who understood him best in the world. If not for Cui Buqu's constant interference, the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai wouldn't have lost so many men and suffered so many setbacks. They were two brilliant men, both born with physical flaws—yet they could never be friends. Fate had ordained them enemies.

Mortal enemies.

When most considered their most meaningful relationships, they thought of their family, friends, or lovers. Yet finding an opponent who was your perfect match was an even rarer thing. Such was the case for Xiao Lü and Cui Buqu. Xiao Lü gazed

at his adversary, smiling patiently as he awaited his answer.

Cui Buqu observed Xiao Lü in return, looking for the madness and ambition lurking beneath the man's calm exterior. He knew the source of such madness—it was dissatisfaction. It would have been better for Xiao Lü to have been born disabled or a fool. Spending one's entire life in ignorant bliss wasn't impossible. Yet the heavens had granted him a handsome face and brilliant abilities without a good fate to match them.

The emperor of the Southern dynasty was an incompetent fool, while the Sui dynasty grew in strength every day. Yang Jian had claimed the throne simply due to his daughter. If those so inferior to him could hold such power, why could Xiao Lü not do the same?

Even if he couldn't become emperor, living an explosive, spectacular life was better than enduring humiliation under the emperor and nobles of the Southern dynasty.

Cui Buqu gazed into Xiao Lü's eyes. Within their inky depths was a spark that refused to be quenched even by the coldest of winters. This man would never bow his head to anyone, even the emperor.

"Cui Buqu. You understand me, but you cannot defeat me." Xiao Lü pointed at Cui Buqu's chest, then at his own. "Your exterior is cold, but your heart is warm. I'm different."

He laughed, loud in the quiet pavilion. "From outside to inside, I'm cold and unfeeling. My heart is made of stone. No matter how hard you try to warm it, you will never succeed. So, Cui Buqu. Dare you accept my challenge? If you don't, concede now and leave the capital. Go far away and never return. I won't go after you."

His tone was calm and refined, as if he were leisurely plucking a flower to admire.

Qin Miaoyu's heart constricted. Cui Buqu would never abandon his duties—but she couldn't help feeling anxious. What would happen if Cui Buqu didn't agree? Xiao Lü might exchange the carrot for the stick and launch an attack on them.

Before Cui Buqu could respond, the sound of rapid hoofbeats came from afar. Qin Miaoyu jerked her head around.

Dust billowed on the road. Someone was galloping toward them from the city gates. The rider bent low, his legs clamped tight to the horse's belly as he urged it to run faster. A fierce wind whipped his sleeves into the air, his figure blurred amid the shadows cast by the flickering lamplight.

"Chief Cui!"

The man was still far from them, but he called out in panic, as if he'd met with a great crisis and was unable to wait.

Cui Buqu looked sharply at Xiao Lü. "What have you done?"

"Guess," Xiao Lü said, amused.

There was no need for Cui Buqu to guess. Pei Jingzhe would be upon them in a moment. Even at this distance in the faint and wavering light, Qin Miaoyu and the others could see the cold sweat sheening Pei Jingzhe's forehead and the ashen pallor of his face.

“Something happened, Chief Cui!” Reining his horse to a halt, Pei Jingzhe barely acknowledged Xiao Lü as he gasped out, “An accident at the Prince of Qin’s residence. Both the crown prince and the princess consort were injured. They’re claiming my lord attacked them! He’s been arrested and taken to the prison!”

Everyone was taken aback. Their thoughts immediately turned to Xiao Lü, and they all directed hostile glares at him.

“If you head back now, you might still have time to plead for him,” Xiao Lü reminded them gently.

Cui Buqu shot him a frosty look as he strode over to Pei Jingzhe. He vaulted onto the horse and wheeled it around. “Stop Xiao Lü,” he commanded. “Don’t let him enter the city.”

With that, he spurred the horse forward and rode for the city gates, vanishing into the darkness.

Left with Pei Jingzhe and the members of the Zuoyue Bureau, Xiao Lü’s guards clustered around him, both sides locked in a stalemate. Yet Xiao Lü didn’t move from his seat. He showed no intention of pursuing Cui Buqu or attacking Qin Miaoyu and the others.

He clasped his hands within his sleeves, a faint smile gracing his lips, as though everything he wanted was already in the palm of his hand. “You may wish to stand there and stare at me, but I have no desire to suffer this biting north wind any longer. Cui Buqu can have his way.”

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Cui Buqu urged his horse to a gallop. The horse’s hooves flew through the air as it charged through the streets, jostling him so violently he thought he would be sick. The fierce winds sliced across his cheeks, knife-sharp, nearly scraping off a layer of skin.

Most of the city’s residents had gone to admire the lanterns, leaving the wide roads empty. The stallion galloped unhindered toward the palace. Cui Buqu raised his gaze slightly. Above the bright and sleepless city, winter had returned with a vengeance. Turbulent winds scoured the streets, threatening to freeze all of creation.

He’d initially planned on charging through the palace gates, but now he thought better of it and yanked on the reins. The horse reared, its hooves pawing the air as it tossed its head and whinnied. Cui Buqu considered for a moment, then decisively turned the horse in another direction.

He didn’t pause again until he was standing before the prison gates of the Ministry of Justice. The biting wind had numbed his upper body. His hands on the reins were stiff and cold, his knuckles a pale blue. They popped when he released the reins.

He identified himself to the guards at the entrance, who looked uneasy but dared not obstruct him. The officials at the ministry dealt often with the Zuoyue Bureau; everyone knew Chief Cui was not to be trifled with. He rarely appeared in person, but given the circumstances, the guards guessed why he’d come.

They allowed him inside, though not before reminding him to keep his visit brief and asking him to put in a good word for them with their superior.

The prison entrance was dark and foreboding, like a gaping maw ready to swallow him whole. This was a place ordinary people were desperate to stay as far away from as possible—most hoped they'd never set foot inside. But Cui Buqu had been here countless times. The Zuoyue Bureau didn't have their own prison. Many of their suspects were brought here after they arrived in the capital and before they were transferred to other facilities after sentencing.

But tonight, the prison felt different. Just as he reached the threshold, Cui Buqu stopped and began to cough.

One cough followed the next, until his chest was burning with pain. Only then did he recall how he'd rushed here, jolted by the horse and buffeted by the freezing winds. It was a painful ordeal for someone suffering from chronic illness. He'd leapt off the horse and rushed into the prison without even pausing to catch his breath, and his panting aggravated his discomfort as the heat mingled with the cold in his lungs.

His brow was tightly furrowed, but he was unable to suppress the prickling of his throat. Phlegm and blood surged up from his chest with the coughs, and he forced himself to swallow them back down, pressing a handkerchief over his mouth.

The guard beside him looked at him in alarm and quietly asked if he was all right. He didn't know Cui Buqu had experienced this countless times and was long used to it.

Eventually the coughing subsided. He straightened his hunched body and tucked the handkerchief back into his sleeves. Then he stepped through the prison gates.

His footfalls echoed in the dim and oppressive interior, each tap of his boots like an invisible boulder heaped on top of the criminals within. Muffled cries echoed down the halls, punctuated by incoherent murmurs. Some of the prisoners rushed toward the bars, pleading their innocence with desperate shouts.

Cui Buqu was used to such scenes; his footsteps didn't slow as he walked farther in. Some of the more timid prisoners shrank back beneath his cold gaze, too afraid to utter a word. The farther into the prison a prisoner was kept, the graver their crime. Unless someone was brazen enough to assassinate the emperor tonight, no one was going to beat Feng Xiao.

In the deepest depths of the prison, a man sat cross-legged, enjoying the hospitality of his solitary cell. He listened as the familiar footsteps drew closer and closer, and even had the leisure to silently count them.

Five, four, three, two, one.

Sure enough, a blue sleeve fluttered into view. His visitor stood in profile; Feng Xiao could only see half his face.

"Deputy Chief Feng looks rather well, considering the circumstances."

"Isn't that because I was waiting for Chief Cui to come for me like the hero rescuing the beauty?" Feng Xiao chuckled.

Chapter 172

FOR A LONG TIME, Cui Buqu said nothing.

He'd hurried all the way here, and his breathing was still ragged. He stood half-hidden in the shadows, his chest on fire, his blood roiling as if it might surge up his throat and out his mouth at any moment.

He thought he'd been careful to hide it, but he couldn't fool Feng Xiao's keen ears. Feng-er clicked his tongue. "Look at yourself! I was only away a moment and you've tormented yourself into this state. Give me your hand."

"Do you understand how serious your situation is…?" Cui Buqu's cold and furious words had barely left his lips when he was seized by another fit of coughing. The sound reverberated through the cold, dark cell like the haunting cries of a ghost.

A hand emerged from within the cell, gripping his wrist and pulling him closer. True qi flowed into his meridians, soothing the turmoil in his chest. The tightness in his throat and chest gradually eased. As his breathing stabilized, his nose caught the metallic stench of blood, faint but unmistakable in the chill air of the prison. Cui Buqu looked up. "You're injured?"

The candle on the wall cast a feeble glow, throwing flickering shadows that obscured Feng Xiao's figure and concealed any injuries hidden beneath his dark clothing.

Feng-er withdrew his hand and stood up under the dim light. Slowly he began to loosen his garments.

Considering the circumstances, Cui Buqu didn't think Feng Xiao was playing around. His expression grew harsher as he watched, until it was sharp as a freshly unsheathed blade, cold enough to freeze anyone unfortunate enough to get too close.

On Feng Xiao's chest, near his heart, was a bloody hole the size of a thumbprint.

Cui Buqu couldn't tell how deep it was, but the purplish-black blood crusted around the wound told him Feng Xiao had been poisoned—and with what. His heart sank. "Gu?"

"On my way to the Prince of Qin's residence, I met a man by the name of Tu'an Qinghe. His martial arts originated from beyond the borders. Unless I'm mistaken, he's a descendant or disciple of Hulugu, once the greatest martial artist of the Göktürks. Fo'er was hailed as the Göktürks' foremost martial artist, but he was far inferior to this Tu'an Qinghe. I never fought Hulugu, but Tu'an Qinghe's martial arts must be comparable to his. I imagine he planted the gu during our duel."

"I also never met Hulugu," said Cui Buqu. "How did this man's skills compare to Xiao Lü's?"

"Slightly superior," said Feng Xiao.

"If you were to fight him with everything you had, what are your odds of winning?"

"Around fifty-fifty."

Although Feng-er was often dismissive of others, his skills were undeniable. Scant few in the world could earn such a remark from him. Cui Buqu knew the various sects of the jianghu like the back of his hand, yet he had never heard of anyone named Tu'an Qinghe. Against that caliber of martial artist, Feng Xiao must have given his all. He wouldn't have anticipated that his opponent would use their battle to poison him with gu.

This gu poison had devastated Yandang Mountain Estate. Pei Jingzhe, too, had also almost fallen victim to it and was only saved by his companions' quick action. If the victim released their true qi before the gu was discovered, the worm would burrow much deeper than a shoulder. Chances of recovery were slim.

Cui Buqu took a step closer. The prison was too dim. He couldn't tell from the wound if the gu was still inside Feng Xiao. Could this be the reason Feng-er had gone berserk at the Prince of Qin's residence?

"The gu," he said. "Have you forced it out?"

Feng Xiao was silent for a moment. "While we were fighting, my focus was entirely on his martial arts. It wasn't until I was on my way to the Prince of Qin's residence that my hand began to itch, as if a living creature crawled beneath my skin. By then I had already used my true qi. The gu worm followed the flow of my blood from my hand to my chest. I've been circulating my qi for a while now, but it's only growing more active. I can feel that it's burrowed from my skin into my muscles. This wound is self-inflicted."

His tone was flat, yet it seemed to conceal an endless and indescribable agony.

So the gu was still inside. Cui Buqu frowned. His throat began to prickle again, but he lowered his head and swallowed his coughs. When he spoke, his voice was hoarser than ever. "Is there nothing else you can try?"

He couldn't imagine it: The proud Feng Xiao succumbing to the gu as it invaded his bones and meridians, becoming like the victims from Yandang Mountain Estate and the spy from the Zuoyue Bureau—driven to madness, slaughtering indiscriminately and harming themselves, then dying a miserable death. The brilliant phoenix with its wings clipped, plummeting from the heavens to be tainted by the dust and grime of the earth, reduced to a wretched mortal.

Feng Xiao merely sighed, but his silence spoke volumes.

Cui Buqu closed his eyes.

His mind was in turmoil. Never before had it been so hard to think. Yet he'd met with scenarios more chaotic and harrowing than this and managed to find a way out. He would this time too.

"I'll summon Qiao Xian back at once. She can help stabilize your injuries, and then we'll go find Fan Yun. When he left Liuli Palace, he took many valuable items with him. Whatever conditions he demands…" Cui Buqu paused. "I'll make sure he cures you."

Feng Xiao looked at him. His eyes blazed like fire in the darkness. "What about the Prince of Qin? And Xiao Lü? You're just going to leave them?"

"This case has already drawn a great deal of attention from the imperial court." Cui Buqu's tone was cool. "The Ministry of Justice will lead the investigation; the Zuoyue Bureau will merely assist. Great Sui is home to a wealth of talent; whether I'm here or not will make no difference."

Feng Xiao sighed. "Cui Buqu. You're willing to say all that nonsense, but you can't simply say 'nothing matters more than your safety'?"

"What difference does it make whether I say it or don't?"

"Of course it makes a difference. If you say it, I'll tell you something important."

Cui Buqu stared at him. “You lied to me?” His tone was suddenly icy. “You motherfucker. You did, didn’t you? You weren’t poisoned.” Though he spoke quietly, it was obvious he was truly furious.

“I was poisoned. What, you think I’d poke holes in myself for fun? I simply discovered the gu in time. It took some effort, but I managed to force it out. I didn’t lie to you,” Feng Xiao said innocently.

“I’ll give you seven minutes to explain the situation from start to finish,” said Cui Buqu coldly.

How unfortunate, thought Feng Xiao. Just a little more and he’d have extracted a confession. Even if Feng Xiao had indirectly confirmed his feelings, it lacked a certain something. Still, if he provoked Cui Buqu into spitting up blood in anger now, it’d be him that ended up channeling him true qi.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he said.

Feng Xiao had incredible willpower. Poisoned by the gu and further influenced by the fragrance and the music, he’d momentarily lost his senses and hallucinated—but only for a moment. When he regained consciousness, he found himself with a sword in his hand. The sword belonged to one of the crown prince’s bodyguards, who was lying injured on the ground a short distance away.

“I examined the guard’s wound before I was arrested. He’d been slashed across the back. But when I awoke, there were three or four people between us. One of them was the crown prince, but he was unharmed—why would I have spared him to kill the guard behind him instead?”

Chapter 173

FENG XIAO HAD NEVER entrusted his life to anyone else. Even in the most harrowing of circumstances, he insisted on taking his fate in his own hands. No one but him would choose whether to advance or retreat. But the treacherous situation he'd encountered last night had been completely outside his expectations. He'd never imagined a formidable fighter like Tu'an Qinghe would resort to such dirty tricks as poisoning him.

He had miscalculated.

After their skirmish, Tu'an Qinghe had vanished. And despite Feng Xiao's suspicions, it also hadn't occurred to him that Tu'an Qinghe had ambushed him specifically because he was heading to the Prince of Qin's banquet.

This was another miscalculation.

Only when Feng Xiao snapped out of his hallucinations did he realize the gu had taken hold of him from the moment he'd seen Xiao Lü. And it hadn't affected only him. He briefly summarized the events of the evening.

"When I struck out, it wasn't with my full strength. Even if I stabbed someone, they'd merely be injured, not dead. But when I came to, everything was in chaos. The crown prince was shouting in panic and summoning the estate guards. I only had time for a brief look around.

"The princess consort was dead, as well as a couple of guards and maids. Each bore sword wounds: The princess consort had been pierced through the heart, while her attendants' throats were cut. The others—including the crown prince and Prince of Jin—had succumbed to the same technique. Their senses were confused, and in their minds, I was the assailant. But could so many people really have been under the influence of the gu?"

Cui Buqu had a question of his own. "Where were you when the chaos broke out? In the open? Or inside?"

"In the guest hall," replied Feng Xiao. "The doors and windows were wide open, and there was music and dance. The music was coming from across the pond; there were no musicians in the building."

"And the fragrance?"

"The women's perfumes and men's scented sachets mixed together with the incense in the hall. I couldn't tell if there was any aromatic cypress mixed in."

"Poisonous gu are nourished by the blood of their creator," Cui Buqu muttered. "When the proper scents, sights, and sounds are introduced, the gu's power will be fully unleashed. But all power comes with a price—this is especially the case for gu that control people's minds. The worms take immense effort to cultivate, and they're bound to the creator's life. If the gu perishes, the creator will be affected as well."

Feng Xiao cocked a brow. "Yandang Mountain Estate, the woods on the outskirts of Luoyang, the Prince of Qin's residence. We've harmed the culprit three times already, yet he hasn't died. Isn't he a bit too resilient?"

“When Kuhezhen entered the Central Plains, perhaps he brought some of the head shamans of the Khaganate with him. There’s a reasonable number of people resistant to gu. On the outskirts of Luoyang, the shaman controlling the gu died in front of us when the worm was destroyed. You were poisoned with another one, which means they have more than one person creating them.”

He paused. “But this kind of poisonous gu is exceedingly rare. I suspect the culprit has reached the limit of what they can create—otherwise the crown prince and the Prince of Jin wouldn’t have recovered so quickly. They weren’t poisoned by the gu, but simply bewitched by the fragrance and music into viewing you as the assailant.”

Feng Xiao began to pace in the narrow confines of the cell, deep in thought. His prison didn’t exactly reek, but he disliked it nonetheless. He was intensely fastidious; even a minor stain meant the entire outfit had to be replaced if at all possible. He was powerful enough to break out by force, but doing so would only hurt his case and add additional complications.

After this incident had shaken the Prince of Qin’s banquet, the entire court would be on high alert. All eyes were on Feng Xiao. The prince’s residence and the palace must be in an uproar. Who knew what chaos was brewing?

Cui Buqu was aware of this as well. Now that he knew Feng Xiao was fine, he became even calmer than usual. They had to keep cool heads if they were to weather the coming storm.

“Someone else must have been infected by the gu and killed the princess consort,” said Feng Xiao. “I didn’t see anyone running berserk after I returned to my senses, so the only possibility is that the killer was killed themselves. But even if someone could smuggle the gu in with no one the wiser, what about the hallucination-inducing incense and music? What’s the explanation there?”

Feng Xiao seemed to be asking both Cui Buqu and himself. Almost before he finished speaking, both had reached the same conclusion.

“There’s a mole in the Prince of Qin’s residence,” Cui Buqu said with certainty. “Whoever it is was also at the scene of the crime. The crown prince’s consort is dead, so it can’t be her. Yet anyone of lesser status would have a hard time orchestrating this. Unless—”

“Unless they were the steward of the residence, the Prince of Qin’s consort, or the Prince of Qin himself,” Feng Xiao finished for him, then lapsed into silence as he suddenly recalled something.

“Hm?” Cui Buqu murmured, urging Feng Xiao to continue.

“The bowl of deer blood.” Feng Xiao sighed softly. “When I entered the palace to meet the emperor, I happened to witness Yang Jun asking His Majesty for a bowl of deer blood to drink. Deer blood is pungent and salty; it invigorates the yin and strengthens the yang, so many nobles are fond of it. Yang Jun has asked for similar things in the past. At the time, I didn’t see anything amiss.”

“Whether Yang Jun was the culprit or someone else, seeking them out now won’t help,” Cui Buqu pointed out. If the prince wasn’t the culprit, he obviously wouldn’t confess. And if he was, he was even less likely to admit to it. The deed was done, and most of the evidence likely disposed of by now. “But if their only goal was to confine you here, their methods were excessive.”

“The Buddhist ceremony is scheduled for the day after tomorrow, and now the princes are certain to miss it. After this incident, the emperor will be more determined than ever to offer prayers and blessings. He would never consider canceling the ceremony.”

“Not the day after tomorrow,” said Cui Buqu. “It’s past midnight. Today is the sixteenth.”

He brushed the dust from his clothing and pulled his cloak more tightly around his shoulders as he readied himself to leave. “I should get going.”

He’d gotten all the information he could from Feng Xiao. Staying any longer would be meaningless, and a day and a night was ample time to accomplish many things.

“Don’t come here in such a sorry state again, Chief Cui,” Feng Xiao said languidly. “You’d be putting this prisoner to a lot of trouble, relying on him to heal you. Next time I might not be so amenable!”

Cui Buqu sneered. “When have you ever been amenable? Wait here obediently. Whether you’re exonerated or not will depend on my venerable self’s mood.”

He said no more but turned on his heel and strode away. He didn’t pause for an instant, and the echo of his steps grew distant and faint until they dissolved into the darkness. The cries and wails of other prisoners had quieted at some point. Now there were only soft moans, barely audible—though that made the atmosphere of the prison all the more unsettling.

Feng Xiao furrowed his brow.

He wasn’t afraid of the prison. He simply hated the damp and the filth, the corners filled with moss and lichen, the ever-present scuttle of insects in the shadows. He could leave now if he wished, but escape would only give their enemies another opening to exploit.

Feng Xiao sighed, moved by the magnitude of his own sacrifice. Only the most noble and virtuous of individuals would willingly endure this environment, yet Feng Xiao was such a one.

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Cui Buqu stood at the gate of the Ministry of Justice’s prison.

Upon seeing his displeased expression, the guards quickly offered their apologies. “Chief Cui, we’re not making things hard for Deputy Chief Feng on purpose. This incident has caused too much of a stir; the entire city is in an uproar. We’re under strict orders from His Majesty that no one is to enter or visit, but your lordship…”

It was not uncommon for visitors to offer the guards flattery or bribes, but it was unheard of for the guards to offer apologies to a visitor. Then again, they were up against the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau—they simply didn’t have the courage to suffer his reprimand.

Cui Buqu nodded. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“Your lordship is the excep—ah?” The guard was still trying to articulate himself and was taken by surprise. He wondered if Cui Buqu was perhaps being sarcastic.

“His Majesty puts great trust in Deputy Chief Feng, but he cannot act unilaterally against public opinion. It’s likely Deputy Chief Feng will be here quite some time.”

“Yes,” the guard answered quickly. “My humble self thinks the same.”

“Would you like to earn some extra money?” asked Cui Buqu.

The guard stared at him, bewildered.

“Find some unwashed chamber pots and clear out the space on either side of the deputy chief’s cell; store them there. In less than half a day, Deputy Chief Feng will willingly offer you money.”

The guard was dumbfounded. “That…doesn’t seem advisable?”

Cui Buqu chuckled. “Not only will he offer you money; I will too. If you’re worried about him seeking revenge, I can write you a note. The Zuoyue Bureau is short of guards. Once this matter is settled, I’ll have you transferred there to carry out your duties under the bright sun. Surely that’s preferable to languishing in this dark and dreary place.”

Seeing the glimmer of interest on the guard’s face, Cui Buqu said no more. He patted the man’s shoulder and left.

He didn’t return to the Zuoyue Bureau, nor did he go to the Prince of Qin’s residence. Instead, he mounted his horse and rode straight for Daxing Palace.

A luminous full moon hung in the sky, illuminating the city and scattering the clouds. It was the sixteenth day of the first month, three-quarters past two in the morning. No one, including Cui Buqu, anticipated then that after this long night, the empire would experience yet another monumental upheaval.

Chapter 174

THE SIXTEENTH DAY of the first month, fourth year of the Kaihuang era—it was long before dawn, but many were destined for a sleepless night. The bustling atmosphere of the previous evening had vanished like smoke with the uproar at the Prince of Qin's residence.

The off-duty Imperial Guards were abruptly summoned from their warm beds. Bewildered, they hastily donned their armor and joined their comrades to enforce a lockdown across all of Daxing City. The sightseers who returned from enjoying the lanterns were shocked to discover that the atmosphere both within and without the capital had changed completely.

What had been festive was now grave, foreboding, and tense. The chill seemed to hang heavy in the air, stifling even the wind into silence.

Nowhere was this more apparent than at the Prince of Qin's residence. The entire street surrounding the complex had been cordoned off. Fortunately, the residents were all high-ranking nobility, so the ordinary citizenry was not significantly impacted.

The gates of the imperial palace, previously locked, had been temporarily opened for the crown prince and other victims of the night's incident. They were swiftly ushered inside for treatment. The unharmed guests at the Prince of Qin's residence remained there, unable to leave without the emperor's orders. He dispatched the Minister of Justice and the head of the Court of Judicial Review to personally investigate the case.

Everyone's faces were ashen. There ought to have been complaints about the house arrest, but no one had the energy, as if their spirits were still weighed down by the slaughter. They talked among themselves, discussing the incident in fervent whispers, but no one could explain how such a disaster had occurred.

The Prince of Qin's residence had been full of song and dance. The killings had happened out of nowhere. Those furthest from the guest hall hadn't realized anything was wrong until the screams had reached them. As for the people in the hall…

The crown prince, the Prince of Jin, the Prince of Qin, and other high-ranking guests had all been taken to the palace for treatment. Even if they were conscious, the emperor likely wouldn't allow them to be interrogated. And the surviving servants and maids were so terrified their souls had practically fled their bodies. They stammered through their answers when questioned, speaking in fragments.

Some claimed to have seen Feng Xiao burst in and start slaughtering guests indiscriminately. Others claimed they'd been conversing peacefully with someone beside them when a sword sliced into their shoulder; they couldn't say what happened after that. One maid claimed two guards had gone mad, striking out at those around them before taking their own lives.

Everyone said conflicting things, the details changing depending on the speaker. The officials from the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review were at their wits' end, and the Zuoyue Bureau's chief, who should have been on the scene, was nowhere to be found. In his place was the deputy chief, Zhangsun Bodhi.

Zhangsun maintained his characteristic silence, leaving the officials of the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review to labor over the interrogations while he assumed the role of an observer. He stood still as a wooden post, listening to everyone without offering his own opinion. The head of the Court of Judicial Review grumbled quietly to himself, suspecting Zhangsun was only there to slack off. At least Cui Buqu would've had a word or two to add.

They continued in this manner until the maid from the residence who'd claimed she'd seen the guards go mad appeared before them. The scribes jotted this down, and the two presiding officials waved their hands for her to be removed and the next witness brought in.

Finally Zhangsun spoke. "Wait."

Everyone turned to look at him.

"Where were you when you saw this?" he asked the maid.

The girl had expected to be dismissed after giving her account. Startled at being pressed for more details, she began to stammer. "Th-this humble maid was serving outside the guest hall. We heard they were short on staff inside, so Mulan-jiejie sent me in to help. But I'd just walked inside when I…when I saw it! I fainted right in the doorway!"

"Besides you, was there anyone else who'd only just entered?" asked Zhangsun Bodhi.

The maid timidly shook her head, and Zhangsun instructed the scribe to record her testimony.

Including the maid, there were fifteen survivors among the residence's staff. Two had been injured in the chaos and were still unconscious. One had suffered a large gash from a sword and passed out afterward from the pain. None of these three had any idea what had happened. Another two had been so frightened their accounts were utterly incoherent. The remaining nine swore Feng Xiao had burst in and attacked. Only this single maid claimed it'd been the guards who'd gone mad and done the killing.

Excluding the three who were unable to speak, as well as the two whose statements were unreliable, it seemed reasonable to trust nine over one. However, all nine had been present in the guest hall throughout the night, while the maid had only just stepped in when the incident occurred.

Cui Buqu had mentioned smelling the same scent of aromatic cypress at both Yandang Mountain Estate and on the outskirts of Luoyang. When paired with enchanting music, some fragrances had the power to trap people in illusions. Such techniques were particularly effective on ordinary people, who had weaker wills and no power to resist. If the guests in the hall had been experiencing a mass hallucination, the things they saw and heard would naturally differ from that of the unexposed maid.

Zhangsun didn't share these thoughts with the officials from the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review. After all, they were ordinary themselves—they'd never experienced such a phenomenon and would struggle to understand it. Rather than wasting words, his time would be better spent digging up the truth.

Zhangsun asked the maid no further questions. He bid farewell to the two presiding officials, then headed to the courtyard where the rest of the household was

being kept.

The Zuoyue Bureau had their own way of handling cases that differed from other bodies of the court. The Minister of Justice was the chief of the Jiejian Bureau himself; he understood this and didn't press for more information. This incident had generated too much attention; it hardly mattered who solved the case now. If they didn't uncover the truth quickly, everyone would suffer the consequences.

The servants and women of the residence were all gathered in one place, awaiting instructions. Zhangsun summoned a few trusted attendants of the Prince of Qin and his wife and asked after the whereabouts of the bowl of deer blood.

The princess consort's personal maid had perished in the incident; they couldn't extract a testimony from her. Almost everyone else was completely clueless, shaking their heads in bewilderment. Finally a cook stepped forward.

"Yesterday a guard brought deer blood to the back kitchen and asked me to heat it up for him," she said.

"Are you sure it was deer blood?" asked Zhangsun.

The cook's voice was clear and bright. She'd dealt with all sorts in the market over the years and was braver than most. Her words came fluidly, without any stammer. "That's right. I said it'd stink if he drank it as it was; it'd be better to turn it into a paste. The guard said there wasn't any time for that. The prince wanted to drink it right away."

Zhangsun invited the cook to view the corpses and asked her to identify the guard. Before long, she pointed to one. "That's him!"

It was one of the two men the maid claimed had gone mad.

A sword had left a fatal slice across his back. His eyes were wide open in death, and veins protruded from his forehead. His face was so horrific it was hard to look upon for long.

But if the deer blood really had contained a gu, how had the bowl of yang-enhancing soup meant for the Prince of Qin ended up in the stomachs of two guards? This man had gone berserk, then died from a blade to the back. Who had been behind him to strike the killing blow?

This was a question no one could answer. Even the maid who'd witnessed the guards begin their killing spree had lost consciousness during the chaos.

Zhangsun had reached a dead end. He sighed, his breath a plume of white in the cold air, and looked instinctively toward the imperial palace.

Cui Buqu had gone into the palace, not to see Empress Dugu, but the emperor himself.

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Yang Jian's face was lined with fatigue. He'd yet to sleep despite the late hour —no one would be in good spirits under such conditions.

Earlier in the evening, the Prince of Qin had entered the palace to invite his father to celebrate the Lantern Festival with him. The invitation was only symbolic, a way to demonstrate his filial piety. Any rational emperor knew better than to visit his

subject's house in the middle of the night, even if that subject was his own son. The Prince of Qin had known his father would decline. And it was a good thing he had—if the emperor had been a little less cautious, he himself might have been one of the casualties tonight.

Along with Cui Buqu, the hall contained an imperial physician, who was currently reporting to the emperor on the injuries of several of the noble victims. The crown prince's consort had suffered the worst—she'd died at the scene before anyone could help her. Her body had not been brought into the palace but remained at the Prince of Qin's residence. Second worst was the Prince of Qin, who'd struck his head against a pillar and lost a large amount of blood. He'd yet to regain consciousness.

The crown prince and the Prince of Jin were somewhat better off. The former had an injured arm and the latter two broken ribs, but they were at least alert. Their accounts matched that of the majority of witnesses in the guest hall: Feng Xiao had burst in and gone on a killing spree. With the emperor's permission, Cui Buqu asked a few questions of his own, but the answers merely confirmed what he'd already been told.

The emperor sighed and dismissed the physician with a wave of his hand. He turned to Cui Buqu. "You heard everything?"

"Your subject heard," said Cui Buqu. "But I'd swear on my life that Feng Xiao couldn't have done this."

The emperor hadn't wanted to say too much, but before Cui Buqu, he couldn't help sharing his thoughts. "I also don't believe it was Feng Xiao. However, once dawn breaks, the city will be in an uproar. Everyone will have their own opinion. When even the crown prince and Prince of Jin claim he's the culprit, what am I to do? And the Prince of Qin is still unconscious—his life hangs in the balance. If the worst comes to pass, do you think Feng Xiao can clear his name?"

Cui Buqu was silent for a moment. "I beg Your Majesty to give me some time to uncover the truth."

"Until the Buddhist ceremony," said the emperor. "That's the most I can do."

The emperor could delay the trial by claiming bloodshed was inappropriate with the ceremony so near, but postponing it any further was likely impossible. Too many people were involved. Even the emperor had to bow to the will of his court.

Cui Buqu was a clever man; he didn't need this explained to him. "Then there's something else for which I must ask Your Majesty's permission."

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By the time Cui Buqu left the palace, dawn had broken over the city.

He hadn't felt this restless in a long time. Although he was a light sleeper, he was always careful not to overexert himself when it was time to settle down at night. But things were different this time, and not only due to Feng Xiao.

The incident at the Prince of Qin's residence was not the end; it was the beginning. A second wave was sure to follow closely behind the first. All they could do was wait for their opponent's next move, without any knowledge of what it might be. It was one thing to contend with Xiao Lü. But now there were also the Göktürks to consider.

Cui Buqu squinted as he stepped out of the palace gates. The bright sunlight bounced off the red walls, dazzling his eyes so he could hardly see.

A hand at his elbow steadied him. “Lord Chief?”

Cui Buqu turned to see Guan Shanhai looking at him with concern.

“How are your injuries?” asked Cui Buqu. His voice was steady and brisk. Hearing it, Guan Shanhai was inexplicably relieved.

He’d resented that the empress had assigned him to the Zuoyue Bureau at first. But as time passed, his dissatisfaction faded. While following Cui Buqu, he’d witnessed him turn defeat into victory in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Despite knowing no martial arts, his cunning strategies were always enough to turn the tide. As long as Cui Buqu was present, no challenge seemed insurmountable.

This was true even now. They were surrounded by a dense fog of confusion; their next step forward might send them plummeting into the abyss. But when he was behind Cui Buqu, Guan Shanhai had the courage to take that step.

“Much better. The Imperial Guard has assembled and awaits your lordship’s command,” he replied.

Cui Buqu vaulted onto his horse. “Let’s go!”

The emperor of Sui had gifted the seventh prince a residence worthy of his station. By the time Cui Buqu arrived, the main gate of the complex was wide open, as if their hosts had anticipated the arrival of a distinguished guest.

The seventh prince sauntered out. On seeing Cui Buqu, his initial look of surprise quickly transformed into a smile. “Could this be the renowned chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, Cui Buqu-langjun?”

Chapter 175

CUI BUQU HAD NO INTEREST in fame. He preferred to remain behind the scenes, strategizing in the shadows. Being the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau came with its own unique privileges, yet before his trip to Liugong City, even Feng Xiao had never met him.

During their journey to the Western Khaganate, however, they'd destroyed a potential treaty between Ishbara and Apa Khagan, sending Yuxiu fleeing with grave injuries and pushing the Western Khaganate to ally with the Sui dynasty. Even if Cui Buqu had no interest in making a name for himself, his reputation inevitably spread among the Göktürks.

Kuhezhen, the prince Ishbara Khagan had sent to Daxing City to pledge allegiance to the Sui dynasty, had long admired Cui Buqu, and now he'd finally come face to face with him. Kuhezhen raised a brow as surprise flickered across his face. He'd heard Cui Buqu's health was poor, but he hadn't expected it to be quite this bad. Cui Buqu's complexion was as pale as the white jade Kuhezhen had offered to the emperor of Sui.

"The first month is cold," Kuhezhen said with genuine concern. "Even if you're busy with official duties, you must take care of yourself."

This was also Cui Buqu's first time meeting the seventh prince of the Göktürks. The prince wore traditional Han garb, his hair gathered in a neat topknot. His dress was no different from anyone on the street in Daxing, and he spoke Chinese with the official accent of the north. If anything, his accent was too precise, to the point that it sounded slightly artificial. His eyes shimmered a soft blue in the sunlight, boundlessly gentle yet hinting at inscrutable depths within.

"Thank you for your concern, Your Highness," said Cui Buqu. "I've recently been occupied with business outside the capital and only returned a few days ago, or I would have come to pay my respects sooner. I beg Your Highness's forgiveness."

Kuhezhen's gaze shifted from Cui Buqu's face, sweeping over the large contingent of Imperial Guards behind him. He laughed. "So, Chief Cui, you came here with this many soldiers to apologize?"

His expression was gentle—there was something there besides the ruggedness of a typical Göktürk man. Perhaps he had a little Han heritage. When he smiled, it evoked the delicate willow fronds of Jiangnan as they swayed gracefully in the spring breeze.

Cui Buqu wasn't moved in the slightest. He'd journeyed through many lands and encountered many Göktürk men and women. Among them were several children of mixed Han and Göktürk heritage, their mothers stolen Han women who'd borne their captors' children in the Khaganate. These children faced frequent discrimination due to their lineage among the Göktürks. To earn the favor and trust of their peers, they pushed themselves harder than their full-blooded counterparts and were often far more unscrupulous in their quest to climb the ranks.

Yuxiu was one such child. As for Kuhezhen…

Cui Buqu cupped his hands in greeting, but the gesture was hollow and perfunctory. "The Buddhist ceremony is tomorrow. His Majesty will personally visit

Daxingshan Temple to offer prayers. It's come to my attention that certain individuals with ulterior motives may seek to exploit the occasion. To ensure Your Highness's personal safety and that of the friendship between Sui and the Khaganate, I fear I must resort to these crude methods. I hope Your Highness understands."

He raised a hand, and Guan Shanhai whistled. The guards swiftly split themselves into two groups that encircled the seventh prince's residence.

The many Göktürk attendants and guards who'd accompanied Kuhezhen to the capital rushed forward with expressions of outrage. They rained condemnation down on Cui Buqu in their native tongue, crying that he was threatening Kuhezhen and trying to incite a war. Cui Buqu remained expressionless throughout, as if he couldn't understand a word of the Turkic language.

In contrast to his subordinates, Kuhezhen remained calm. "Chief Cui," he reasoned patiently, "although I have come to Great Sui to serve His Majesty, my people and I are not sheep to be slaughtered. Look how many soldiers you've summoned to my residence. What kind of turmoil would it stir up between our nations if I send a letter back to the Khaganate?"

"Your Highness, these guards are only here to protect you from the harm of nefarious individuals," Cui Buqu replied. "They will depart after tomorrow's ceremony, and Your Highness will once again have your liberty. Your Highness's safety is our highest priority, even if it means you must endure this injustice for a day or two. Surely Your Highness can see how hard this is on His Majesty and the court."

He paused and gave Kuhezhen a probing look. "Unless Your Highness has somewhere to be—some plans that require you to leave?"

"You misunderstand, Chief Cui." Kuhezhen's expression was innocent. "I'm merely concerned that after the Buddhist ceremony, you'll find yourself in an awkward position. How will you explain this to His Majesty? What will you tell the Khaganate?"

"Please don't worry too much for my sake, Your Highness."

"I've heard many stories about you, Chief Cui, and I hold you in high esteem," said Kuhezhen earnestly. "I'd hate to see you backed into a corner."

He took a few careful steps forward. Guan Shanhai's hand flew to the hilt of his sword, but before he could step up and block the prince's path, Cui Buqu raised a hand to stop him.

Kuhezhen leaned in, enunciating his next words carefully. "You've stirred up quite a commotion. Have you thought how you'll resolve it?"

"Does Your Highness truly believe Xiao Lü to be a reliable and trustworthy ally, one who will never betray you?" countered Cui Buqu.

Kuhezhen smiled slightly and shook his head. He took a few steps back, then abruptly changed the subject. "The weather is rather nice today—clear skies."

Before Cui Buqu could ponder the deeper meaning of this remark, a clamor erupted around them. The once-disciplined Imperial Guards became agitated, falling out of formation as they whispered among themselves. Even the horses grew restless, shifting anxiously. Their riders grasped for the reins and patted their necks but failed to soothe their distress.

"Lord Chief…" Guan Shanhai cried out. "Look at the sky!"

It was the first time Cui Buqu had heard the voice of the steady Guan Shanhai tremble with fear. What could be in the sky? As formidable as Xiao Lü and Kuhezhen might have been, they couldn't control the heavens.

But Cui Buqu, too, had realized his surroundings were slowly growing dimmer. Dawn had broken hours ago; the morning sun should have been bright. But now the shadows around them lengthened, as if it were nearing dusk.

"An eclipse! The celestial dogs are eating the sun!"

"Quick, hide!"

"What should we do?!"

Everyone's faces were slack with panic. The Imperial Guards were no exception, and even the Göktürks around Kuhezhen looked up at the sky with expressions of terror and confusion. Some had already begun to seek places to hide. Guan Shanhai struggled to compose himself and ordered the guards to quiet down.

Only Kuhezhen and Cui Buqu maintained their composure. Slowly, Cui Buqu raised his head.

The daylight was no longer blinding. The sun was shrouded by darkness, as if truly devoured by a celestial dog. He didn't need to look around to know that the entire capital must be in an uproar both within and without.

As stated in the ancient texts—

The sun symbolizes the essence of life; it embodies grace, benevolence, and the sovereign himself. When eclipsed, it foretells a calamity for the emperor: His nation will collapse within three years. When a ruler is fickle and volatile, when he recklessly executes innocents and disregards the will of the heavens, the lands, and the divine, he summons the devouring eclipse.[4]

Throughout history, both in the highest echelons of court and the lowest rural villages, eclipses had always been considered bad omens. The more complete the eclipse, the more dire the state of the nation. The reactions of those around him reflected this.

But something was wrong.

The Grand Historian was responsible for astronomical calculations. Eclipses could unsettle a nation, but they were highly predictable. So why hadn't he warned the emperor of this one? Or—had the emperor known but not communicated it to Cui Buqu? Cui Buqu quickly dismissed the thought. If the emperor had known, he would have made sure to alert him.

He gazed at Kuhezhen, whose eyes curved in a smile, his fathomless blue irises as gentle as water. The look he turned upon Cui Buqu was indescribably lovely, as if the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau was someone he'd pledged his heart to and couldn't bear to disappoint. He hadn't said a word, but Cui Buqu was certain he had anticipated this.

Cui Buqu suddenly turned to the guards. "Only a nation without virtue will see the sun and moon lose their light!" he cried in a ringing voice.

Everyone's eyes went to him.

"The Southern dynasty has long been marked by ineptitude. The emperors of Chen indulge in hedonism and surround themselves with corrupt ministers and wicked consorts! In contrast, our Great Sui is revitalized and renewed, with a wise ruler and capable ministers, like the sun rising in the east! One light, one dark. This is a revelation from the heavens: Our Great Sui will flourish while Southern Chen will fade into obscurity. Wherever our imperial troops march, they shall surely prevail, crushing all before them!"

As Cui Buqu reached the latter half of his speech, Guan Shanhai discreetly pressed a hand to his back, infusing him with internal energy and ensuring his voice could carry further.

His declaration was instantly effective. As they listened, many shook off their confusion. *Indeed, the Sui dynasty is only three years old,* they couldn't help but think. *Our emperor has reformed the laws, lightened punishments, and amassed men of great talent. These are signs of a new dynasty's vigor and glory! Surely the solar eclipse cannot bode ill for us.* If it wasn't referring to them, then it must, as Cui Buqu said, refer to the south. Or perhaps it was an indictment of the rapacious ambitions of the Göktürks right in front of them!

There was no need for Cui Buqu to go on. As the Imperial Guards gradually calmed, they turned to Kuhezhen and the Göktürks and nailed them with hostile glares.

Compared to the throng of guards before them, Kuhezhen's forces now appeared small and vulnerable. They circled protectively around Kuhezhen, wary of an attack.

Surprise flickered across Kuhezhen's face—not at how the tables had turned, but rather because he knew how terrified the people of the Central Plains were of eclipses. Their fear ran as deep as the Göktürks' when their god's wrath swept over the steppes of the Khaganate. Yet Cui Buqu not only remained unaffected, he had managed to immediately stabilize the situation, transforming the guards' fear into animosity toward the Göktürks.

After a moment of astonishment, Kuhezhen burst into laughter. "Chief Cui truly lives up to his reputation! I've been told you're one of the most formidable men in all of Great Sui, and now I've seen it for myself."

Cui Buqu had no interest in engaging any further with Kuhezhen. He ordered Guan Shanhai to tighten the circle around the seventh prince's residence, then turned his horse back toward Daxing Palace.

He was on his way to the palace gates when two pieces of news found him, on the lips of two different people.

The first was Qin Miaoyu, who had been ordered to keep an eye on Zheng Yi and ensure he didn't share Liu Fang and Li Mu's fate. But what she'd considered an easy task had gone utterly wrong. Zheng Yi was dead.

The second was Ming Yue. He'd gone to the palace to pay his respects, but after the eclipse, he'd learned another piece of crucial news and rushed out to share it with Cui Buqu. The Grand Historian, Hong Yuan, was also dead.

Chapter 176

ZHENG YI WAS A MAN who cherished his life. After the sequential deaths of Li Mu and Liu Fang, Zheng Yi would have realized something was wrong no matter how stupid he was—and Zheng Yi was not a stupid man.

He took a leave of absence from the court, citing illness, and spent his days at home reading, writing, and caring for his flowers and plants.

When the day of the Lantern Festival came, Zheng Yi's family went out to enjoy the lights and festivities. By this time he was growing restless. Several times he'd wanted to go out, only to be persuaded out of it by his family. He resisted the urge to attend the grand evening banquet at the Prince of Qin's residence.

Thus he had missed the scene of carnage that night.

Zheng Yi was relieved, but he grew even more cautious about the risk to his own life. After receiving the news, he spent the rest of the night in his study, refusing to come to the door no matter who called him.

Qin Miaoyu was uncertain whether Zheng Yi had some connection to their enemy they didn't yet know about. Fearing that recklessly revealing herself might alert them, she monitored him in secret. She watched him vigilantly from the shadows with barely any rest, not daring to be lax.

Yet despite all her precautions, she had failed.

The solar eclipse had shaken the entire capital, and the Zheng residence was no exception. Zheng Yi dashed from the house, his face ashen as he muttered about needing to see the emperor. Ignoring his family's protests, he ordered a carriage prepared.

It was Qin Miaoyu's first time witnessing such a legendary celestial phenomenon, and she was momentarily flustered. She rushed off after Zheng Yi shortly after he boarded the carriage. But the small delay cost her: Zheng Yi's carriage had stopped halfway to the palace.

Afterward, the carriage driver reported that his lord had complained of a terrible stomachache. He'd ordered the carriage to a halt and stepped out to use the restroom of a tofu shop along the street, lest he embarrass himself upon entering the palace. He went into the building but never came back out.

When Qin Miaoyu dashed inside to check, she found Zheng Yi dead.

"He had no external injuries, and he hasn't been examined by a coroner. I couldn't tell if he was poisoned. The Zheng family said he had a pre-existing heart condition; they think the shock of the solar eclipse triggered a heart attack. But it's too much of a coincidence. It was my failure in supervising him that led to Zheng Yi's death. I ask Chief Cui for his punishment!"

Qin Miaoyu waited, her heart suspended in her chest. If it weren't for her negligence, Zheng Yi might have survived. Although she wasn't a subordinate of the Zuoyue Bureau, with Feng Xiao imprisoned, she'd been ordered to assist Cui Buqu. He effectively had temporary authority over the Jiejian Bureau.

First the solar eclipse, then Zheng Yi's death. Those with ill intentions were stirring up a storm, aggravating the uncertainties of the people and casting doubt on the emperor's rule. The court was engulfed in turmoil as chaos broke out again and again. Even the highest ranks of ministers whispered among themselves, struggling to make sense of these strange events. Since the new year, it'd been crisis after crisis without respite. Some, speaking in even more hushed tones, had even begun discussing whether they should change the name of the ruling era.

Before one wave could ebb away, another was already crashing over them.

Qin Miaoyu had previously scoffed at the claim that usurping the throne was against the will of the heavens. Now her conviction began to waver. Such was the power of both rumors and calamities, whether natural or man-made. If even Qin Miaoyu felt this way, then the feelings of the common folk went without saying.

Cui Buqu said nothing. Instead he looked at Ming Yue, who sighed. "My news is more complicated."

He'd met the emperor just as the solar eclipse occurred. It wasn't only the common people who'd been thrown into panic and confusion. The entirety of the palace had reacted the same way. But the emperor remained resolute. Despite his anger and fear, his mind had gone to the same question as Cui Buqu's—where was the Grand Historian?

He had swiftly sent people to arrest the man for his major dereliction of duty, only to receive the news that the Grand Historian had died at home.

Forecasting a solar eclipse was part of the Grand Historian's duties. A matter of such importance ought to have been reported to the emperor without delay. Indeed, had the emperor been informed sooner, the court could have made adequate preparations, and the ministers would have been able to devise countermeasures beforehand.

The two most important responsibilities of the state were worship and warfare. Yet after the Qin and Han dynasties, the role of the Grand Historian's office in divining the nation's fate had slowly eroded, leading to a decline in the authority of its officials. The office was still important, but most of the time they had little to do. It was an unpopular and neglected department.

Apart from the Grand Historian himself, his office consisted of the Deputy Grand Historian, the calendar official, and various other positions. As untimely as his death was, the Grand Historian couldn't have kept something so significant concealed without their cooperation. In fact, it was the calendar official, Li Xin, who was tasked with astronomical observations. His stargazing abilities were exceptional, far beyond even those of Grand Historian Hong Yuan himself.

When the men sent by the emperor came to seize Li Xin for questioning, he was terrified out of his wits. He insisted he'd warned Hong Yuan long ago, but Hong Yuan had said he'd report it in secret. He instructed Li Xin to keep quiet and avoid spreading the word. Li Xin had understood the gravity of the situation and that disclosing the eclipse publicly would be inadvisable. He kept silent and didn't inform anyone.

A few days later, Hong Yuan informed him he'd reported the matter to the emperor. Li Xin was relieved. Hong Yuan was his direct superior; Li Xin had never questioned that he'd done as he said. Who would have imagined such a thing? Only today, as the capital boiled over with panic, had Li Xin realized Hong Yuan hadn't

reported the matter at all.

Ming Yue spilled all these details in a rush, then paused to catch his breath.

Hong Yuan had also hung himself at home. The suicide note he left stated that he deserved a thousand deaths for his crimes. He offered his life in atonement and requested the emperor show mercy toward his family.

Cui Buqu raised a brow. “His family?”

The Jiejian Bureau, too, specialized in these kinds of investigations; Ming Yue instantly understood what he was asking. “His wife passed away many years back, and he has only one son, who went missing months ago. Hong Yuan told the neighbors his son left home to seek an education. The Grand Historian was reclusive by nature and had few friends at court, so this detail went largely unquestioned by those around him. In any case, most people want to avoid being tainted by association. They won’t get too close to the officials of the Grand Historian’s department.”

Everything had happened so quickly, and he’d hurried over as soon as he could —this was all the information Ming Yue had managed to gather.

Cui Buqu mulled it over in silence.

Ming Yue and Qin Miaoyu didn’t interrupt him. Anyone could see how unfavorable their situation was. The enemy was hiding in the shadows, while Great Sui was an enormous target lying entirely in the open.

In recent years, the emperor had poured most of his energy into managing the threat posed by the Göktürks to the north. The two sides had engaged in an intermittent back-and-forth that devolved into open conflict on several occasions. Great Sui had paid a steep price to force the Göktürks to surrender, but it was an unprecedented achievement—even the renowned Emperor Wu of the previous Zhou dynasty had been forced to take a Göktürk princess as his empress to demonstrate goodwill. But Great Sui hadn’t shied from battle, and the Göktürks, realizing they had poor odds of prevailing in a direct confrontation, had turned to more underhanded schemes.

Then there was the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, which had grand ambitions. Xiao Lü wasn’t from the Sui dynasty and had no patriotic feelings toward the nation or its emperor. He had no scruples about collaborating with the Göktürks.

It was easy to guard against open conflict and hard to guard against an attack from the shadows. In this case, the enemy had even used celestial phenomena to throw the entire capital into disarray.

Hong Yuan was a pawn, one who’d probably been put in place months ago, if not earlier. As astute as Cui Buqu was, even he hadn’t anticipated the enemy using him in their plans. While Hong Yuan was being compromised, Cui Buqu had probably been on his way to Liugong City, occupied with secret talks with the Western Khaganate. Xiao Lü had planned for the far future.

It was no longer a matter of simply finding the right clues or asking the right questions. Their only lead was a dead end. It’d be extraordinarily difficult to uncover the truth before the Buddhist ceremony tomorrow.

The ceremony would take place at Daxingshan Temple. Many in the north were Buddhist, and the temple took its name from the emperor of Sui’s title before he’d ascended the throne. After receiving strong support from the court, it had been

designated as a national temple.

The emperor himself would attend the ceremony tomorrow, so both the inside and outside of the temple had been under strict martial law since the previous day. The monks couldn't leave without the abbot's order, and the ring of Imperial Guards surrounding it was as tight as a drum. After the solar eclipse, the temple's defenses had been strengthened yet again; even a drop of water couldn't slip through. Yet despite all the precautions, Ming Yue and Qin Miaoyu were sure the enemy would take the opportunity to sow more chaos.

Tomorrow, the victors would be decided—but they still had no idea what form the enemy's attack would take.

"Chief Cui," Qin Miaoyu blurted, "why not persuade the emperor to cancel tomorrow's ceremony? Or send a body double…"

"No," Ming Yue cut in. "If the solar eclipse hadn't happened, perhaps we could cancel the ceremony. But now we must proceed, whether it be to soothe the people's fears or to seek atonement from the heavens."

Their enemies had likely concocted all their schemes with the goal that the ceremony would proceed.

Qin Miaoyu had to admit he was right. "Forgive me for being blunt, but could the two lordships explain where and when you think the enemy will make their move tomorrow? It would help us prepare."

"Daxingshan Temple is sure to be their focus," said Ming Yue. "Just a few days ago, Chief Cui informed the emperor that all monks at the temple would undergo a comprehensive investigation. No one will be permitted to enter the temple without the abbot's personal authorization, and every nook and cranny has been meticulously searched to ensure there are no hidden assassins or explosives."

Qin Miaoyu considered this and couldn't think of anything they had overlooked. "Very prudent."

Cui Buqu shook his head. "It's not enough."

They both looked to him for an explanation, yet all he said was "Ming Yue, I need you to do two things for me."

***

Most ordinary people would never set foot in the Ministry of Justice's prison. Those who did were grateful to sit quietly in their cells without being summoned for interrogation or punishment.

Feng Xiao wasn't grateful in the least.

From afar came the sound of weeping. Those not aware of the nature of the prison would have thought the place haunted. A damp, musty smell drifted past Feng Xiao's nose—the odor of decayed grass that hadn't seen the sunlight in years.

Feng Xiao sat down to meditate. The less he saw, the less irritated he'd be.

Once a martial artist reached a state of complete detachment—from both themselves and their surroundings—they could effectively shut out all external stimuli. Feng Xiao intentionally dulled his five senses, choosing to disregard any

sights, sounds, or smells. In this state, his body was protected by true qi. Any petty thief attempting to attack him would bring serious misfortune upon themselves unless they possessed martial arts comparable to Xiao Lü's.

Yet just as he finished regulating his breath and qi and emerged from his meditation, a terrible stench hit him, so overwhelming he nearly retched.

What the hell happened?!

Chapter 177

FENG XIAO THOUGHT he'd meditated until his soul had fluttered out of his body and landed in a night soil cart. The noxious stench wafted in from both sides, so pungent it was like a solid wall as it closed in around him. Feng Xiao was about to ascend to nirvana; he itched to transform into smoke and vanish from the world.

His obsession with cleanliness had begun in childhood. During his martial arts training, his seniors had instructed him to do a handstand against the wall to build his strength and will. To prevent his palms from touching the gravel, he'd taken the finest silk garments from his chest and placed them under his hands, nearly driving his seniors to death in their rage.

Now that very same Feng-langjun was trapped in this horrific predicament. His thoughts could be expressed in several ways.

Two syllables: *Vomit*.

Three syllables: *Disgusting.*

Four syllables: *I'll murder them.*

Five syllables: *I'd rather be dead.*

Feng Xiao would rather have been attacked by Tu'an Qinghe, Xiao Lü, and Yuxiu all at the same time than stay where he was a second longer and suffer this assault on his nose.

The two guards next door lugged the last chamber pot into place. They too felt like they were about to vomit. Their faces were wrapped in thick layers of cloth, yet they were unable to escape the foul odor assailing their nostrils. Fortunately the weather was still cool. If they'd been in the sweltering heat of summer, it would have been a true hell on earth. They exchanged a silent glance. Then, in perfect synchrony, they turned and fled for their lives.

They pelted frantically down the hall until they reached the door. Only then did they finally let out the breath they'd been holding.

"Hey, considering who that guy is…aren't you afraid he'll come after us once he gets out?" The first guard gasped, removing the cloth from his face as he huffed and puffed.

"Don't worry! By then, we won't be in this hellhole anymore!" The second guard chuckled.

The words had scarcely left his mouth when a sinister voice came from behind. "I see. Do the two of you have somewhere better to be? Do share."

The guard jolted in fear. He slowly turned his head.

An extraordinarily handsome face came into view. Had he seen such a good-looking man on the streets, the guard would have given him a few more glances. But now his complexion turned ashen, and he forced a ghastly smile. "Deputy…Deputy Chief Feng!"

Each cell in the Ministry of Justice's prison was secured with three heavy locks crafted by the royal locksmiths. Even the most crafty and notorious of criminals were

unable to escape. Yet Feng Xiao had broken free as if it was child's play.

The guard quickly gathered himself and fell to his knees with a *thud.* "Forgive us, Deputy Chief Feng! We had a surplus of chamber pots in the prison and nowhere to put them. The cells next to yours were both empty, so my humble self thought to store them there for a short time. I saw your lordship meditating, so I didn't dare disturb you. I'll—I'll remove them right away! Right now!"

"Quite clever of you not to implicate Cui Buqu." Feng Xiao sneered. "In that case, you can go crying to him after I beat you up!"

The guard was speechless.

Feng Xiao suddenly smiled. "I'm afraid I must be going. Since you were so eager to drive me away, I'll grant your wish."

He took a step toward the door. The terrified guards didn't dare stand in his way; all they could do was plead desperately. "I have elderly parents and young children to care for," the first guard cried. "Please, Deputy Chief Feng, show some mercy! I'll clean the chamber pots immediately, and I'll replace them with fresh flowers! Your cell will smell sweet and wonderful and your lordship will feel right at home. Please don't go, Deputy Chief Feng!"

The two guards were on the verge of clinging to Feng Xiao's legs in tears.

"You don't want to be blamed for my escape?" asked Feng Xiao.

The guards nodded fervently.

"Come, I'll show you how to avoid blame." Feng Xiao beckoned them closer.

The two guards crept forward, ears perked up attentively, only to feel their bodies suddenly go numb. They were rendered motionless, unable to utter a sound as Feng Xiao grabbed each of them by the neck and dragged them back into the depths of the prison.

He tossed them into the cells where they'd left the chamber pots. With their acupoints sealed, they'd be forced to lie amid the unwashed pots and enjoy the stench until someone came to relieve them in a few hours. By that time, their noses would probably have lost the ability to distinguish anything.

Feng Xiao snorted coldly, turning to leave. He strode through the prison as if out for a leisurely stroll. As he approached the door, he stripped off his filthy outer garments and took down one of the guard uniforms hung on the wall, pursing his lips in disdain as he shrugged it on.

That bastard Cui Buqu knew his weaknesses far too well. Feng Xiao felt as if his hair, his skin, his every pore was radiating a foul stench. He didn't know or care if it was day or night, or if the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai were concocting some new and devastating scheme.

At that moment, there was only one thing that mattered to him: finding somewhere to take a bath.

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Kuhezhen knelt on the ground and stretched out his left wrist. His skin was paler than that of most Göktürks, and after arriving in the Central Plains, he had

realized he was fair even compared to the average Han. While those in the Central Plains saw fair skin as a sign of beauty, the Göktürks did not; his pale skin had made him the subject of mockery throughout his childhood and adolescence. Even as a Göktürk prince, his status was precarious.

Kuhezhen gripped a dagger in his right hand and heated the blade over the fire. When it glowed red, he dragged the sharp edge across his wrist. Crimson beaded on his fair skin. The blood fought to reach the surface, where it swelled into heavy drops before trickling down in rivulets. He watched it drip, a slight smirk playing at the corners of his lips as if the act of self-harm was a thrill in itself.

The blood ran down into a black clay pot on the table, pooling silently inside. If one were to place this palm-sized pot in the sunlight, they would see that its interior teemed with wriggling worms. The worms were long and soft, their squirming bodies encased in a membrane that shimmered gold in the sun.

Pei Jingzhe and the victims of Yandang Mountain Estate would surely have recognized them as the gu that had invaded their bodies.

As more blood dripped down, the worms writhed faster within the pot, savoring their bloody feast. Kuhezhen's face grew paler and paler, but the smile on his lips widened.

A hand seized his, pressing on his acupoint to stop the bleeding. Kuhezhen's smile faded, but he was unable to free himself from the newcomer's grip as they dragged him away from the pot.

"Tu'an," Kuhezhen said, shaking him off in fury. "Stay out of my business. Don't ruin my plans!"

"I didn't want to interfere," said Tu'an Qinghe coldly. "But look at yourself. You're barely hanging on as it is. At this rate, you'll waste away before Yang Jian perishes!"

Kuhezhen was still kneeling on the ground. He instinctively tried to straighten up to retort, but a spate of dizziness overcame him. He braced himself against the table. "Tomorrow…" He licked his lips. "After tomorrow, my plans will come to fruition. Don't get in my way. Cui Buqu and his group are a troublesome lot, and Xiao Lü may change his mind at any moment. None of them are trustworthy; every move is a risk. I'll leave Feng Xiao to you—enjoy a battle with him if you wish."

"And then what?" asked Tu'an Qinghe. "You'll die? Didn't you say everyone has looked down on you since childhood, so you want to achieve a great victory? These worms might help you achieve your goal, but what's the point if you die halfway?"

Kuhezhen smiled. "I won't die. Tu'an, you were born a winner. You can't understand people like me. Even if I was stranded in the desert hanging on by a breath, as long as I had a single drop of water, I'd survive. Even if I destroy my body and my health, as long as my mind is clear, it's enough for me to control the Khaganate."

"But what's the point?" asked Tu'an Qinghe.

"Couldn't I ask you the same?" Kuhezhen countered. "What's the point of leaving your mountains to seek out experts and duel? So what if you win? So what if you lose?"

“The path of martial arts is never-ending, but the kind of power you seek will lead you down the road of self-destruction.”

Kuhezhen sneered. “What about your shifu? Didn’t Hulugu perish in his never-ending pursuit of martial arts? Human desire is always insatiable. The only difference is in what you desire.”

Tu’an Qinghe fell silent, the muscles of his jaw subtly tightening in displeasure. If he had more to say on the matter, he kept it to himself.

“Tu’an.” Kuhezhen softened his tone. “We’ve known each other since we were children. Although our time together may be brief, you are a dear friend to me. I know you’re only worried for me. Once all this is behind us and I’ve fulfilled my ambitions, I promise to find expert fighters for you to pit your skills against. I’ll help you ascend to the pinnacle of martial arts.”

“Your Highness,” said Tu’an Qinghe. “What exactly are you trying to do?”

“I want Yang Jian dead.” Kuhezhen said slowly.

“He still has many sons.”

Kuhezhen shook his head. “His sons are young, and they lack their father’s charisma. They don’t pose a significant threat. The Yuwen clan has long borne a grudge against him over the usurpation, while Princess Qianjin has been pushing Father to wage war in the south for years. Once Yang Jian dies, the Southern dynasty will be overjoyed. They’ll be first to take advantage of the situation. The Northern dynasty will be thrown into chaos. If we, the Göktürks, make the most of our opportunities, we can march south and seize great swaths of land, allowing us to unite the Eastern and Western Khaganates.”

“By then, you’ll have one foot in the grave.”

“My father promised that once I complete this task, he’ll grant me the position of yabghu.”

Tu’an Qinghe didn’t answer, but his expression proclaimed his thoughts as clearly as any words. *You’re so mistrustful, yet you believe him?*

Kuhezhen’s face grew paler, and his lips flushed redder. The sunlight streaming over his features granted him an inexplicable allure.

Tu’an Qinghe knew Kuhezhen hadn’t always been like this. But his body had been eroded by poison and depleted of vital energy. He was a man drained dry.

The more potent the poison, the stronger its backlash—this was a universal law.

“Of course I’d never place my hopes in anyone else. I’ve also planted a gu in my father.” Kuhezhen smiled. “I have plenty of ways to ensure he keeps his word.”

“And once you’re yabghu, you won’t covet the position of khagan?”

Kuhezhen shook his head. “I haven’t thought that far ahead. My experience and reputation aren’t enough to convince people, and I can’t plant a gu in everyone. Compared to playing at being the intimidating Göktürk khagan, perhaps it’s wiser for me to pull the strings from the shadows.”

“This is the last time,” said Tu’an Qinghe firmly. “I won’t help you again.”

Kuhezhen sighed. “Thank you.”

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Sunset of the sixteenth day of the first month found Cui Buqu leaning on a table, head in hand—having surrendered, at least briefly, to sleep. He'd been awake for almost a day and a half since the morning of the Lantern Festival. His endurance was beyond the limits of most ordinary people, but he'd held on through sheer willpower—until now. He'd only let his guard down a little, intending to sit and organize his thoughts, but had drifted off to sleep instead.

Outside, the sky blazed a golden red that slowly gave way to a dazzling purple as light began to bleed from the world.

It was difficult to rest comfortably in this position. Cui Buqu's brow furrowed slightly in his sleep. He dreamed that Feng Xiao had immobilized all his acupoints, leaving him unable to even blink. He demanded Cui Buqu admire his glory and splendor, ordering him to compose a poem before he'd let him go.

Cui Buqu was adept at setting people up. But composing poetry? He'd never learned anything of the sort. Fuming, he cursed at Feng Xiao, who burst into laughter and gave him a shove.

He tilted to the side and startled awake. Someone was sitting in front of him. In the dimness, he recognized Zhangsun Bodhi.

"I didn't light a lamp," Zhangsun Bodhi said. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"What's happened?" Cui Buqu rubbed at his nose.

Zhangsun shook his head. "Nothing important. You can keep resting. Just a small matter."

"Speak."

"Feng Xiao broke out of prison."

Cui Buqu looked back at him in silence.

Chapter 178

"WHERE DID HE GO after breaking out?" asked Cui Buqu.

"No one knows. The Jiejian Bureau hasn't seen him. He walked right out of the Ministry of Justice's own prison, so his escape was impossible to conceal. His Majesty already knows, of course, but the news is being kept under wraps as much as possible. After speaking to the emperor, Ming Yue took someone else to the prison, then told everyone Feng Xiao had surrendered and returned to his cell."

But this was merely a ruse to stop the news from spreading. Everyone involved would know it wasn't the real Feng Xiao. If Deputy Chief Feng had run, he'd never willingly return.

Zhangsun Bodhi expected Cui Buqu would explode in rage over Feng Xiao complicating things at such a critical time. But surprisingly, Cui Buqu was calm; an odd expression passed over his face, then he nodded his head in acknowledgment.

"The Buddhist ceremony will be heavily guarded," said Zhangsun Bodhi. "But if the enemy has an expert like Xiao Lü with them, Ming Yue and I might not be enough."

Feng-er was an exceptional martial artist and an indispensable ally. If he didn't make an appearance tomorrow, they might be in grave trouble.

"If he hasn't shown himself, there's no point in worrying about him," said Cui Buqu. "Xiao Lü was badly injured in their battle at the tavern and has yet to fully recover. He'll be fighting at only seventy or eighty percent of his full ability. If you and Ming Yue combine your efforts, it should be enough."

Zhangsun disagreed. "There's still Tu'an Qinghe."

"The Göktürks have had their sights set on the Central Plains for as long as anyone can remember, but this is the capital. His Majesty is surrounded by many experts. If Tu'an Qinghe wishes to attack him, he can't accomplish his goals alone. If we reinforce our defenses too openly, we might drive the enemy to devise even more strategies against us; we'd be wiser to adopt a more passive approach. When the time comes, we'll take appropriate countermeasures."

"You're saying you wish to use His Majesty as bait?"

His tone wasn't accusatory. It was just the two of them in the room. No third party would overhear Zhangsun's question. They were in the open, while the enemy lurked in the dark. Even the most fortified armor had a weak point, and their defenses were spread thin over too many places and people; flaws and vulnerabilities abounded. Luring the enemy in and adapting their tactics in the moment was the best course of action.

Slowly, Cui Buqu nodded.

Zhangsun was silent for a moment. "Understood. I'll summon personnel and make thorough preparations."

Cui Buqu coughed a few times. "Don't be nervous. Many things seem beyond our control, but in reality, the danger is not as great as it seems."

"What do you mean?"

The sun had sunk completely below the horizon, and the last remnants of twilight had faded away. Darkness shrouded the city. Cui Buqu shivered slightly and pulled his cloak tighter around him. Observing this, Zhangsun prodded at the flames in the stove. Soon the room was warm once more.

The night of the sixteenth was unusually chilly. The authorities had reinstated the usual curfew after the incident at the Prince of Qin's residence. In a sharp contrast to the bustling atmosphere of the previous night, a deep silence had settled over the capital. Only faint sounds came from outside the hall—perhaps the soft whisper of falling snow. If not for the trial that awaited them, it would have been a serene night, perfectly suited for peaceful sleep.

But Cui Buqu was not sleeping.

"Xiao Lü and Kuhezhen must have reached some agreement to work against us," he said calmly. "But Xiao Lü has no foothold in the Sui dynasty. If he wishes to usurp the throne, he must use a puppet—most likely someone close to the emperor. If he wishes to ensure a smooth transition, one of his goals must be to maintain stability. He might not wish to kill His Majesty. Kuhezhen is different. He desires chaos in Great Sui, the more the better. That's the only way the Göktürks will get the opportunity they want. His plans require the emperor's death.

"We can exploit this conflict between them," Cui Buqu concluded. "Their disagreement will give us our chance."

Zhangsun sighed, the sound very soft. He had never been someone who sighed. This was the first time Cui Buqu had seen him so unsure. "I have no confidence," Zhangsun said. "But tomorrow, I shall do my utmost."

Cui Buqu offered him a small smile. "Zhangsun, my strategies aren't invincible; even the strategist Zhuge Liang made a misstep on occasion. I have no evidence that my deductions are correct. I, too, can only do my best."

His face was flushed faintly pink from the heat of the stove, yet he still appeared alarmingly frail. Zhangsun thought he looked even paler now than he had the past few days. The color on his cheeks failed to add any warmth to his face; instead, the stove's fire was like a flickering candle, burning up the last dregs of its energy to impart what little life it could to Cui Buqu's tired body.

"Lord Chief." Zhangsun furrowed his brow. "Don't go tomorrow. Let me handle it."

"You know that's impossible," Cui Buqu replied calmly.

Zhangsun Bodhi's lips twitched. He wanted to say something, but ultimately swallowed the words. Cui Buqu had always been sickly; every year he fell ill when winter arrived. But recently he'd been in high spirits and spent little time in bed. To the uninformed observer, he might appear in fairly good health. But Zhangsun Bodhi knew it wasn't so. In fact, it was the opposite: Cui Buqu's current state was highly abnormal. It resembled a terminal surge of energy before death.

Zhangsun couldn't bring himself to say those ominous words aloud.

The chief's health had always been precarious. Any doctor who examined him would inevitably forecast a limited lifespan—three to five months, or, at best, three to five years. The blunter ones would go so far as to suggest he get his affairs in order.

Cui Buqu defied fate with his existence. He'd been this way as long as Zhangsun had known him: dragging along his ailing body yet never collapsing. Over

time, everyone had developed a kind of delusion that Cui Buqu would never stumble or die.

But a delusion was just that. A failing body couldn't suddenly restore itself to full health. Cui Buqu exhausting his strength like this would only burn down the candle quicker. At this moment he seemed fine, but in truth, he'd reached the limits of his endurance. He was like a lamp running low on oil, slowly growing dim.

Zhangsun Bodhi knew all the Buddhist scriptures by heart, but he struggled to comfort others. Prattling on was not in his nature, so all he could say was "Don't push yourself. Remember, you still have us."

Cui Buqu seemed to sense Zhangsun's thoughts. He patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. I can hold on."

At the very least, he would last through tomorrow's ordeal.

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As night fell, what had begun as a light flurry of snow turned into great cottony drifts that blanketed the streets. In the princess's residence, the same tranquil hush enveloped the surroundings as the occupants readied themselves for slumber.

The banquet that had been originally planned for tonight had been canceled in the wake of the events of the Lantern Festival. The atmosphere within the palace had grown increasingly tense in the run-up to tomorrow's Buddhist ceremony. All the city's nobles and officials were like moles that'd smelled the first signs of a storm on the wind. They hunkered quietly down in their burrows, locking their doors and windows. The three nights of the Lantern Festival had never been so desolate.

But Princess Leping had yet to prepare for sleep—even her hairpin remained in her hair. She sat awake on her bed, agitated in the extreme as she gazed at the young woman who'd just entered the room with sorrow in her eyes.

"Huan-niang, are you still unwilling to let me go?"

Chapter 179

THE YOUNG WOMAN wore a long skirt of vivid scarlet. She swept into the room, graceful and poised, a slight smile curving her lips. Everyone in the princess's residence knew this young woman: Duchess Yuwen Eying.

But Princess Leping displayed no hint of familiarity upon seeing her daughter. In fact, her demeanor was exceedingly odd. She reacted as though she was looking at a complete stranger rather than the girl with whom she'd shared countless days and nights. On her face was a mixture of fear, regret, and indescribable sorrow, yet the young lady's smile only brightened. It was a sharp smile, and held more anger than joy.

"Are you so unhappy to see me, Mother?"

"No… It's not that…" Princess Leping stammered. In a bid to ease the tension, she swiftly continued, "Huan-niang, you were separated from your mother for over ten years. Think how fortunate we are to be reunited. So please, can you stop with this treachery?"

Tears welled in the princess's eyes. She grabbed the girl's hands, her gaze shimmering as she begged, "I will plead with your grandparents to grant you a title! A princess's daughter wouldn't normally have one, but your grandparents cherish me. If you wish to be a duchess, they'll make you one, of an even higher rank than your sister. Won't that do?"

“Can I be a princess?” asked the girl softly.

Princess Leping froze.

The girl smiled. “Even if the daughter of a princess receives a title, she can never be a princess herself. Only the emperor’s daughter can be a princess. Mother, I was born a princess, so why should I lower myself to be a mere county duchess—a title I’d have to beg for?”

Princess Leping’s face went pale. She found herself unable to speak.

“Mother, do you know? When I was young, I didn’t even know I had a mother. A-xiong said I was hanging onto life by a single breath. The palace servants placed me in a freshly dug grave—they even started filling it. If he’d come a moment later, I’d have departed this world. But I was tough even then; I insisted on living. I survived and grew up, and now I can stand before you and speak to you.

“When A-xiong adopted me, I was very small. I cried every day, and because his family had fallen on hard times, he couldn’t afford a wet nurse. He had no idea how to raise me, so he found a female wolf who’d just given birth to a litter of pups. I was raised on wolf’s milk. And my sister? She was a legitimate princess, my father’s only daughter. You must have showered her with love and attention.”

The girl crouched down and looked up at Princess Leping. Her smile had faded; a pure innocence surfaced in its place. She looked completely sincere, like a child seeking answers from her parents.

Tears streamed down Princess Leping’s face. Her lips trembled. “I’m sorry. Back then…”

Back then, her father-in-law, Emperor Wu, had deep suspicions about her father and had been on guard against the whole Yang family. Even as princess consort, fear followed Princess Leping throughout the palace. When she learned of the death of one of her infants, she’d cried for a while but hadn’t dwelled on it. She’d never considered the possibility that the child might still be alive.

All these years, Princess Leping had only one blood daughter: Yuwen Eying. She cherished the girl as her dearest treasure and was determined to give her the very best of everything. How was she to know she had another daughter wandering lost in the outside world?

When Yuwen Yihuan first came to her, Princess Leping could scarcely believe her eyes. She looked exactly like Yuwen Eying. There was no need to test her; her looks were proof enough of their relationship. Yuwen Yihuan’s voice, comportment, her every smile and frown—they all mirrored those of Yuwen Eying. If the two of them stood together and didn’t smile or speak, even Princess Leping was unable to tell them apart.

Yuwen Yihuan told her mother about the hardships she’d endured over the years. She expressed her desire to remain discreet about her identity lest her grandfather become suspicious.

Princess Leping knew her parents were exceedingly careful. If they learned Yuwen Yihuan had been living in the outside world all these years, it’d be quite the scandal. She agreed to her daughter’s request, thinking she’d come clean to Empress Dugu when the opportunity presented itself. Surely, Empress Dugu would come to love Yuwen Yihuan too.

As for Yuwen Eying, she was a simple child. Upon hearing she had a twin sister, she was ecstatic and readily agreed to keep her secret. The princess and her daughters came up with a plan, and Yuwen Yihuan and Yuwen Eying began to take turns showing up at the princess's residence, each playing the role of the duchess. They continued this way until the day of the thousand-lantern banquet, when Yuwen Yihuan's overly clever performance aroused Cui Buqu's suspicions.

Cui Buqu wasn't the type to dismiss his own doubts. He thought carefully about the peculiar behavior of Duchess Yuwen that night, and by sifting through the scattering of clues, had already guessed most of Yuwen Yihuan's story. But he could never have predicted that Xiao Lü's infiltration of the princess's residence had begun so long ago.

Princess Leping gradually discovered that her long-lost eldest daughter was not as naive or gentle as Yuwen Eying. The girl harbored a burning ambition. It was she who encouraged the princess to invest in Linlang Pavilion and collect dividends from them each year.

The princess's residence received a stipend from the court, and Princess Leping owned several properties gifted to her by the emperor. But when Sui supplanted Zhou, much of what had originally belonged to the royal treasury was absorbed by the new regime. While Princess Leping had kept her exalted status after her demotion from empress dowager to imperial princess, her assets had diminished considerably. As the emperor's firstborn daughter, she was expected to host banquets every few days, yet she occasionally found herself short of funds. Yuwen Yihuan's suggestions and astute management ushered in a significant influx of money. It didn't take long for Princess Leping to grow used to her daughter handling household finances.

Observing that her mother was in low spirits, Yuwen Yihuan had even arranged a lover for her. Princess Leping was a woman with a woman's desires. Her status made remarrying difficult, but there was nothing wrong with taking a paramour. The emperor and empress turned a blind eye to the situation, while Princess Leping's reliance on her eldest daughter only increased.

Yuwen Yihuan never spoke ill of the emperor and empress in front of Princess Leping, but she dropped subtle reminders that Princess Leping's status was no longer what it had been.

A princess was a proud daughter of the heavens, yet this one was unable to control her own fate. Yuwen Yihuan knew her mother had always felt resentment toward the empress. It had originated when she was offered in marriage to the Yuwen family and became the princess consort, and continued right up to the moment her father had personally exterminated the Yuwen clan, destroying her family. The bitterness of many years simmered deep within her heart.

Yuwen Yihuan saw this resentment for what it was. She nurtured it bit by bit, ensuring it burgeoned in strength.

For the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, there was no collaborator more suitable than Princess Leping. She was a woman and the emperor's eldest daughter, so she wouldn't raise his suspicions or alert him. But she was also a member of the Yuwen family—she'd borne them two daughters that still carried their name. She had a lifelong connection to them, one that could never be severed. The princess served as a bridge, and also as cover. Through her, they created opportunities to attack and advance, but also defend and retreat.

Unbeknownst to Princess Leping, she'd become a pawn in Yuwen Yihuan's hand, at the mercy of her daughter and Xiao Lü. By the time she sensed something amiss and wished to turn back, she was horrified to find the path cut off behind her—it was too late.

"Huan-niang, let's stop this!" Princess Leping grasped Yuwen Yihuan's hands. "I'm terrified. I can't go on. Since Mother fell ill, every time I enter the palace, I'm deathly afraid of exposing our secrets! Huan-niang, I don't want to be the empress dowager again. Can't the three of us simply live together in peace?"

"Mother, once the bow is drawn, the arrow must fly." Yuwen Yihuan shook her head. "What's done cannot be undone. Everything's ready. Tomorrow is the Buddhist ceremony. A-xiong will arrange everything; there's nothing you need to do. Just remain quietly in the princess's residence and await good news."

"The Yuwen family's power is gone!" Princess Leping's voice trembled. "They cannot regain the throne!"

Yuwen Yihuan smiled. "Mother worries too much. Grandfather has already exterminated the Yuwen family; there's no son to take the throne. Once Third Uncle becomes emperor, I'll be granted the title of princess and marry A-xiong. He will direct court politics as prince consort. There's no need for you to fret like this. I assure you, the splendor and wealth you've enjoyed will only increase."

On hearing the words *Third Uncle*, what little color remained in Princess Leping's face drained away, and her hands and feet turned cold. There was truly no turning back. "Then…what about Ying-niang? When will you bring her back? She's your own little sister!"

"Once this matter is finalized, of course Ying-niang will return," Yuwen Yihuan said gently. But her words froze Princess Leping's heart in her chest.

"You… Are you using Ying-niang as a hostage to threaten me?" she asked hoarsely.

"Mother, you're doing it again. You're always like this, favoring my little sister over me. Is it because I didn't grow up at your side? Or is it because I'm more capable, and you feel the need to protect her?" Yuwen Yihuan's lips were still curved in a smile, but her eyes had grown frigid. "She's my little sister, so how could I harm her? But the crucial moment is upon us. What's wrong with keeping her away from the strife?"

Her patience had been exhausted. Stepping swiftly forward, she tapped several acupoints on Princess Leping's body, and the princess closed her eyes and slumped onto the bed.

Yuwen Yihuan drew the blankets up over her mother. "Sleep now," she whispered. "When you wake up tomorrow, this will all be over."

She raised her hand, ready to seal a few more acupoints to ensure Princess Leping didn't awaken too early and spoil their plans. But Princess Leping wasn't a martial artist, and she was growing old. Locking more of her acupoints might harm her. Yuwen Yihuan hesitated, her face pulled into a tight grimace, as if disgusted at her own indecision. Finally, she turned and left.

Outside, the snow continued to fall. How many in the capital passed a sleepless night in their beds, tossing and turning?

The seventeenth day of the first month dawned, washing the city with pale light from the east.

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"Get up! Hurry and get up already!"

"Quick! Today is the day!"

"Change and wash up; the emperor will be arriving at five!"

The monk Congjing was first to rise in Daxingshan Temple. He went around rousing his peers, leaving the monks on the communal mattresses rubbing sleep out of their eyes as they stirred.

Outside, the sky had not yet brightened. It was even earlier than the time they usually rose for morning prayers, but no one complained. Everyone knew what day it was. Very soon now, His Majesty the emperor would come to the national temple for prayers and blessings while Master Lingzang presided over the ceremony.

One young monk in the center of the room slept at a distance from his peers, a cotton blanket crumpled between him and the others as a barrier. Congjing shook his head. How fussy this junior was! How was the young man supposed to achieve enlightenment like that? Yet before he could give him a tap, Congyun sat up on his own.

Congjing was delighted. "You're finally not sleeping in today? So you *can* do it when it matters! Hurry up and get ready!"

Congyun nodded and silently pulled on his clothes.

Despite his nagging, Congjing wasn't truly angry. Congyun had recently come down with a cold, leaving his throat sore and his voice hoarse. If not for the fact that they needed everyone they had today, his monastic siblings would have urged him to get more rest.

Fortunately Congyun didn't need to speak while serving at the ceremony. If he could get through today, he'd have plenty of time to recuperate. More importantly, Congyun was extraordinarily handsome. Whenever he stood near Master Lingzang, he looked exactly like one of those jade-faced youths who served the bodhisattvas.

The monks all dressed and trickled out of the room, one by one.

When Congyun saw that everyone had gone, he surreptitiously pulled out a jar of moisturizing ointment and applied it to his face.

It couldn't be helped—the weather was very dry.

Chapter 180

DAWN'S LIGHT was still faint on the horizon as Yu Qingze waited for his family to bring over his horse. He adjusted his jade crown and brushed off his clothes, then vaulted into the saddle, ready to head toward the palace gates.

His wife, Lady Zhao, came personally to see him off. "Take care, my lord. Have a safe trip."

The general nodded and set his heels to his horse's sides.

The war between Great Sui and the Göktürks had come to an end just before the new year. He'd returned from the front lines to deliver his report in time to experience the Lantern Festival, and had been summoned on short notice to accompany the emperor to the Buddhist ceremony.

The emperor kept a small and carefully chosen company today. Only his most trusted ministers were permitted to join him for the ceremony. Nearly all the valued officials who participated in decision making at the Council Hall were included—their presence demonstrated the great importance the emperor placed on this prayer ceremony. After all, there'd been a solar eclipse only the day before. Whether to atone before the heavens or soothe the hearts of the people, the Buddhist ceremony had to showcase the grandeur of Great Sui to its subjects.

The ministers had gathered, and the time had come. They set off from the Zhuque Gate with the emperor in a grand procession. Their destination was Daxingshan Temple, located in Jingshan Ward.

The snow on both sides of the road had been cleared overnight. Downy drifts still piled up on the rooftops, but this didn't impede travel. As the sun rose, the snow began to melt away—perhaps a sign that their troubles would soon fade as well, making way for a new beginning.

He Zhong, one of the emperor's personal attendants, glanced up at the sky. He quickly lowered his gaze again, looking straight ahead as he kept pace with the Imperial Guard. Inwardly, he breathed a silent sigh of relief. His mood had eased considerably.

After yesterday's eclipse, he'd been on tenterhooks—and he wasn't the only one. No one at the palace had dared even breathe too loudly.

The emperor's face had been like a thundercloud since the start of the year, and the empress had been bedridden in the palace. After the upheaval at the Prince of Qin's residence on the night of the Lantern Festival, the emperor's mood had reached a new low. As an attendant who served the emperor so closely, He Zhong naturally wasn't happy either. Court ministers often tried to curry favor with him due to his position, but in front of the emperor, He Zhong had to walk on eggshells while still dutifully carrying out his responsibilities as an attendant.

The Buddhist ceremony was something that couldn't be put off; they would have proceeded as scheduled even if a blizzard struck. But seeing the snow clear filled him with new hope.

May today go smoothly. No more snow, and no more eclipses! He Zhong prayed in his heart. Those around him were all of the same mind.

Soldiers had cleared the imperial street for the procession, and the shops on either side were tightly shut. Only the sound of hoofbeats and footsteps accompanied them down the road. There was no conversation or chatter. An occasional bird flew through the blue skies, its crisp calls echoing through the clouds.

It had been a long time since He Zhong had felt this relaxed. Lulled by the sound of the birds, he lost himself in thought, his gaze sweeping over the ministers around him. The generals marched in front, clearing the way, and they were followed by civil officials. Even pillars of the nation such as Yu Qingze were among them. It was a reassuring sight.

Only one face was conspicuously absent—Feng Xiao's.

He'd been embroiled in the trouble at the Prince of Qin's residence, then escaped the Ministry of Justice's prison. No one had seen him since. Having Deputy Chief Feng here with all his martial arts would have been even more of a comfort.

He Zhong recalled the emperor's stormy expression when the breakout was reported the previous day. In truth, He Zhong also found it hard to believe Feng Xiao was the culprit. But in that case, what was he trying to do? The emperor favored him immensely; if he wanted a higher rank and greater wealth, he needed only say the word. It made no sense for him to do something as absurd as attack the royal family.

Nevertheless, the evidence was compelling. The crown prince, the Prince of Jin, and several others had all testified against him. Without a solid explanation, even the emperor was unable to help him.

He Zhong's position was special, as he was often in close proximity to the emperor. Because he was tight-lipped and discreet, the ruling couple trusted him deeply. He knew many secrets that most people, even high-ranking officials, did not. For example, he knew that, some time ago, the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau had come before the emperor and empress. He had linked several suspicious events to the people around Princess Leping and even suggested that the princess herself was involved.

At the time, He Zhong had been standing at the entrance to the hall. What he'd overhead had shocked him. He desperately wished he'd been born deaf and blind; he determinedly pretended he didn't know the Zuoyue chief had been there at all. But afterward, he noticed the emperor and empress putting distance between themselves and Princess Leping. They no longer sent her gifts as freely as before.

When the incident had occurred at the Prince of Qin's residence, He Zhong's thoughts had turned at once to the princess. But Princess Leping hadn't been at the Prince of Qin's residence that night. She hadn't attended the banquet or even visited in the days leading up to the attack. With the princess cleared of suspicion, Deputy Chief Feng became the prime suspect.

He Zhong would never voice his thoughts, but he had privately considered the matter numerous times. Unfortunately, the more he mulled it over, the more he found the truth shrouded in layers of fog, impossible to clear.

If neither Princess Leping nor Deputy Chief Feng was the murderer who attacked the banquet, then who could it be? Surely it couldn't be Chief Cui playing a villain to catch one? He suddenly noticed that Cui Buqu was not among the procession today either—where had he gone? Honestly, things had been going awry since the start of the year. Should they change the name of their ruling era from Kaihuang to something else?

The scent of incense grew stronger as they approached their destination, rousing He Zhong from his reverie. It was the rich, warm smell of sandalwood, unique to the temple. He raised his head and saw the swooping eaves of the majestic mountain gates standing before him.

Clearing his throat, he called a drawn-out "Stop—!"

The imperial procession came to a halt. He Zhong bowed and lifted the tasseled curtain, helping the emperor alight from the palanquin. The emperor himself had requested this: He wished to walk through the mountain gates alone, without attendants, to demonstrate his sincerity.

All the officials dismounted, falling into step behind the emperor.

Master Lingzang, the temple's abbot, personally came out to greet them. He had been a close friend of the emperor since his days as the Duke of Sui. Although the temple's monks were understandably nervous about the emperor's visit, Master Lingzang was as calm and composed as ever, an attitude that only deepened the emperor's respect for him.

They exchanged a few words, and Master Lingzang led the emperor into the temple. He brought him through to the main Mahavira Hall, while the officials stopped to wait in outer Tianwang Hall.

"Your Majesty's mind is clouded, and your emotions are in turmoil. I fear you'll find it difficult to worship with a sincere heart."

Only Master Lingzang would dare say such words. The emperor wasn't upset; instead, he sighed. "I know. But I can't seem to settle my heart. I even took some calming medicine before leaving the palace."

"To untie the bell, one must find the one who tied it," Master Lingzang quietly chanted. "The Buddha resides in the heart. Worshipping him serves to cultivate peace of mind. If the obstacles in Your Majesty's heart remain, all worship will be meaningless."

The emperor was silent for a moment. "My heart has too many obstacles; I must resolve them before the Buddha."

Master Lingzang didn't say anything further, but his face was filled with compassion. He beckoned the emperor to follow.

He Zhong pricked up his ears, listening intently to their conversation as he walked behind them. It wasn't that he wished to pry into the emperor's thoughts, but it was his duty to anticipate the emperor's needs.

Master Lingzang and the emperor walked in front, while He Zhong and the junior monks trailed after them. He Zhong's eye caught on the young monk beside Master Lingzang. He had a handsome face and carried himself with remarkable poise. He appeared to be an exemplary Buddhist—his focus was drawn inward, and not once did he glance in He Zhong's direction.

When they arrived outside the main hall, Master Lingzang instructed them to offer incense as a display of their sincerity. Focused on holding his three sticks of incense, He Zhong tripped on a protruding stone. Just as he was about to topple, a hand reached out and steadied him. Even the three sticks of incense that had slipped from his fingers were snatched from the air and shoved back into his hands, as if by magic.

It was as though he had never tripped at all. He Zhong's eyes went wide, his heart pounding. He almost thought he'd imagined the entire thing. Falling and hurting himself was a trivial matter, but making a fool of himself before the emperor was a serious offense. If not for the young monk beside him, he'd probably have lost his head.

Shaken, He Zhong waited until the emperor offered his incense and took the chance to quietly thank the young monk. The monk waved a hand and pointed to his mouth, silent.

So this young man was mute.

He Zhong mused that becoming one of the monks who accompanied Master Lingzang was no small feat in itself. Not only did the abbot's attendants have to be beautiful, they must also be skillful and agile. It was a pity the man couldn't speak—he'd never be able to give a sermon as a high monk in the future.

He glanced at the young monk, then inserted the incense into the burner and hurried after the emperor.

The sound of Buddhist sutras drifted through Daxingshan Temple. Inside the main hall, the chanting seemed to wrap around them like a wall of shimmering gold, enclosing the temple in its protection. Even if it was only an imaginary barrier, He Zhong grew steadily calmer.

He gazed at the emperor, seated cross-legged in the center of the hall. Perhaps he was experiencing a similar sense of relief.

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Feng Xiao had no idea He Zhong felt so sorry for him.

In fact, he hadn't intended to infiltrate Daxingshan Temple. But he'd only just escaped the Ministry of Justice and desperately needed to wash and change his clothes. Returning to the Jiejian Bureau was not an option—only if he remained in the shadows would he pose a threat to the enemy.

He'd been contemplating finding a brothel and pretending he was a wandering gentleman in order to rid himself of the stench when he passed Daxingshan Temple. The smell of sandalwood and the soft sound of chanting had stopped him in his tracks. In the distance, a young monk happened to be returning to the temple. A brilliant idea bloomed in Feng Xiao's mind.

He could never previously have given up all his worldly attachments, but things had changed. After marinating in the smell of chamber pots for hours, his nose seemed to be broken—everything still reeked. He'd need to wash his hair ten times at least. Psychological scarring was difficult to heal.

Why not start anew?

His neurotic need for cleanliness was the deciding factor. He crept up behind the returning monk, a young man named Congyun, and knocked him out cold. After tapping his sleep acupoints, he tossed him under a bridge on the outskirts of the city with some water and dry rations. The unfortunate young man wouldn't be back for several days—and Feng Xiao only needed one.

He Zhong's stumble was no accident. Feng Xiao deliberately led him toward the protruding brick. No matter how well one concealed their martial prowess, it was difficult to suppress reflexes. But He Zhong's reaction had been that of an ordinary person; he couldn't be an infiltrator. Feng Xiao promptly turned his attention elsewhere.

Throughout the day, he'd wandered all over the temple under various pretexts and seen no suspicious individuals. But it was possible they were too well-hidden for him to find by simply walking around. Feng-er furrowed his brow, then smoothed it, resuming the act of a silent and dutiful monk.

The emperor sat on the mat for a long time, but the chanting failed to soothe him. A restless beast seemed to pace anxiously within his chest.

The war with the Göktürks had lasted three years. The previous dynasty had attempted to secure peace with the Khaganate through marriage, but the emperor of Sui refused to compromise. He opted to steadily grind the Göktürks down. He sent envoys to sow discord among the tribes while also engaging them in open battle. This combination of soft and hard tactics had ultimately forced Ishbara Khagan to sue for peace.

It was an achievement on par with those of Qin Shi Huang, first to unify the disparate nations of the land, or the legendary Emperor Wu of Han. The emperor himself was exceedingly pleased. Even if he didn't order it, future history texts would surely chronicle his contributions in vivid detail.

Yet this joy had been unexpectedly dampened by a series of setbacks. Someone had sought to catch him off guard with the solar eclipse, this much was true—but while the enemy could bribe Hong Yuan, they couldn't control the heavens. Could it be that he really shouldn't have usurped the Yuwens?

At last the Buddhist rites came to a close, and the monks lining the walls quietly departed. At the center of the vast Mahavira Hall, only Master Lingzang and the emperor remained.

Even He Zhong had retreated to a corner. Without waiting for the emperor's orders, he closed the doors, giving them privacy to converse.

Master Lingzang and the emperor sat face to face, both silent. A long time passed.

"Was I too ruthless in eradicating the Yuwen family?" The emperor seemed to be asking himself as much as Master Lingzang.

"Your Majesty already knows the answer in your heart," said Master Lingzang. "Why do you ask me?"

The emperor's voice was hoarse. "No dynasty yields to another without bloodshed. What choice did I have…?"

His voice trailed off. Despite his justifications, he couldn't rid himself of his guilt.

Master Lingzang sighed. "Heads are not like chives, Your Majesty. Once you cut them off, they will not grow back. Your Majesty understands this well; your recent disquiet is due to your own inner demons. However, the new dynasty you've established—one that stabilizes our borders and eases the burdens on the people—has greatly benefited the common folk. Such progress would never have been possible under the previous dynasty. Each year, countless civilians on the borders faced

slaughter or capture at the hands of the Göktürks. The line between good and evil is not a clear one. You've taken lives, yet you've also done great deeds. We cannot generalize. Your Majesty does what Your Majesty must. Remember your guilt over the Yuwen family and become merciful. Hundreds of years from now, when all these events are history, the people of the future shall come to their own conclusions."

The emperor's old friend was a monk through and through, and often spoke in abstruse terms that made it hard for ordinary folk to understand him. It was rare for him to offer such candid words of comfort.

After days of being repressed, the emperor's emotions finally surged to the fore. Eyes reddening at the rims, he forced a smile. "Truly, you understand me best."

Master Lingzang's counsel had banished half his worries in one stroke.

"Allow me to recite a sutra for Your Majesty," suggested Master Lingzang.

The emperor nodded. "I would be much obliged."

Master Lingzang didn't overthink his choice. He casually recited a passage from the Surangama Sutra. The emperor didn't need to hear him recite any text in particular; all he needed was inner peace. A thousand words from a bystander were nothing compared to a single moment of self-enlightenment.

Master Lingzang recited the sutra, his words like flowing water. His voice was aged, yet it wasn't hoarse but filled with a tranquility brought about by the slow ebb of time. The fragrance of sandalwood permeated the air as the rhythmic sound of chanting filled the hall. Gradually, the emperor slipped into a reverie. Scenes of the past flitted before his eyes.

His first meeting with Emperor Wu of Zhou in his youth, when they'd enjoyed a hearty conversation.

Emperor Wu of Zhou pointing at Crown Prince Yuwen Yun and saying, *I have a brilliant son, and you have a lovely daughter. Would they not be a perfect match?*

Emperor Wu of Zhou listening to the words of the soothsayer that had led him to gradually distance himself from Yang Jian and grow suspicious of him. Their peaceful relationship as ruler and subject had devolved into hostility. He'd endured and compromised for many years until Emperor Wu finally passed. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief.

Kindness and enmity, fondness and hate. It was no longer clear with whom each had originated. But the Yuwen family had never killed a single member of the Yang clan. On the contrary, it was he who'd exterminated them, root and branch. If Emperor Wu was in the underworld now, could he let go of his grievances with a smile?

The emperor slowly turned to look at the giant statue of the Buddha in front of him, as if hoping to glean some answer from the bodhisattva's faint and mysterious smile. The bodhisattva's eyes were lowered, its lips shaped in a soft curve.

Suddenly the curve widened, pulling eerily on its face until its entire expression warped. Its golden gaze swung over to rest upon the emperor.

The emperor's eyes widened in shock. He froze, as if struck by lightning.

Quiet laughter drifted into his ears, pitched first high and then low, echoing ominously through the hall. The emperor's first thought was that someone had intruded on them. But he soon realized the eerie chuckles came not from any living person, but from the mouths of the twenty-four celestial statues lining either side of

the hall.

The Buddha statue's uncanny grin sharpened. The statue's arm swung down too fast for him to evade—the emperor cried out as a heavy hand clapped him on the shoulder. He collapsed backward.

"Your Majesty!"

The emperor jolted awake. His face was white as a sheet, cold sweat sheening his brow. But there was no demonic Buddha statue—only Master Lingzang's worried face looking down at him.

Chapter 181

THE HALL WAS STILL, unchanged from when he had entered. The scent of sandalwood curled around them. The bodhisattva's eyes remained lowered, compassionate and serene amid the ringing of Buddhist bells.

The emperor gasped, his chest heaving. Only when his palm slipped on the mat did he realize his hands were so sweaty they'd almost soaked the cushion beneath him. His heart was racing. When he looked around, the statues still seemed to hold a hint of uncanny savagery. The eerie, indistinct laughter lingered in his ears, etched into his memory.

"I… What happened?"

"You nearly succumbed to your inner demons, Your Majesty." Master Lingzang sighed. The emperor's mental distress was more severe than he thought. He was in a temple surrounded by buddhas, awash in their bells and sutras, yet he was becoming more and more agitated.

"I heard the howling and weeping of ghosts," the emperor said. "They clung to me, refusing to rest—they tried to drag me to hell with them!" The emperor's back was still clammy with sweat. Somehow he felt this place was tainted, though he knew it to be impossible. Daxingshan Temple had been renowned for three hundred years. What wandering ghosts or malevolent spirits would dare dance in front of the bodhisattvas who had stood here for centuries?

He met Master Lingzang's eyes and found himself unable to speak this thought aloud. "Perhaps I'm simply too tired."

"While this old monk was wandering the lands," said Master Lingzang, "I learned of a calming draught that can soothe the mind and settle the spirit. Allow me to write it down for you later. You can ask the imperial physicians to look it over before you decide to use it."

The emperor's smile was stiff. "Thank you."

Seeing how listless he was, Master Lingzang set aside the recitation of sutras. He instructed He Zhong to open the doors and supported the emperor into a side room for rest.

The Buddhist ceremony was a three-day affair, with the second portion beginning in the afternoon. If nothing went awry, the emperor would fast and pray for three days. Afterward, the court would pass down an edict acknowledging the emperor's wrongs and seeking forgiveness from heaven, and the matter would be laid to rest.

The officials were still waiting in Tianwang Hall, unaware of what had transpired. All they knew was that the emperor had exited quickly and that his complexion was poor.

Daxingshan Temple took up an entire block by itself, and there was plenty of room within to accommodate the imperial entourage and ministers. During the afternoon ritual, Yu Qingze and the others followed the attending monks into the main hall so they could listen from the edges of the room.

But the emperor never made an appearance.

Asleep in the side room, he was dreaming a long dream. He dreamed again of Yuwen Yong, as well as his son-in-law Yuwen Yun and the many people he'd killed. They were resurrected in his nightmare, their faces drenched in blood as they pursued him, intent on exacting revenge.

The emperor fled them in his dreams until, exhausted, he finally struggled to wakefulness. As he gazed up at the sky outside the window, he realized night had descended.

He Zhong's gentle voice drifted into his ears. "Your Majesty, you slept soundly all afternoon. Master Lingzang said it was a good thing; the rituals are best performed with a sincere heart, so I hesitated to disturb your slumber. How is Your Majesty feeling now? Would you like some dinner?"

The emperor rubbed his forehead. He felt a lingering grogginess, as if he'd yet to recover from the afternoon's vision, but he was in somewhat better spirits after his rest.

He murmured in affirmation, and He Zhong quickly jogged out. He returned with a group of monks carrying all sorts of vegetarian dishes.

"Today…feels colder than yesterday?" the emperor ventured.

"Yes, it's snowing outside." He Zhong fetched a cloak and draped it over him.

"Tell the kitchen to prepare some warming ginger soup and have it sent to Yu Qingze and the soldiers."

He Zhong bowed in acknowledgment and smiled. "You're very considerate, Your Majesty. This humble servant never thought of doing that." He ordered a young eunuch to stay behind while he busied himself with the emperor's orders.

The emperor casually picked some scriptures from a nearby bookshelf, reading as he ate. A deafening roar echoed in the distance—the muted growl of rolling thunder.

Snow and thunder at the same time? Startled, the emperor turned to look outside, his pleasant mood vanishing in an instant.

He'd encountered thunder during snowfall once in his youth and felt no sense of foreboding at the time. But considering the series of strange occurrences over the past few days, even the slightest anomaly set his heart racing. After today's horrifying visions, he was paranoid and jumping at shadows.

Another wave of thunder rumbled, clap echoing after clap as the snowflakes drifted down.

He knew he wouldn't be the only one disturbed. First the eclipse, now a thunderstorm in winter—the common folk would also start to entertain wild ideas about omens.

Unsettled, he could no longer focus on the scriptures. He dropped the book on the desk. "Come," he said to the eunuch, "let us go for a walk!"

He would call on Master Lingzang. Right now, the abbot was the only one who could understand him, the only one who could bring him hope.

The clever young eunuch understood at once. He hurried out, questioning monks along the way until he was told that Master Lingzang was still in the main hall, then returned to lead the emperor there.

As night settled over the city, Daxingshan Temple fell into a deep and unnerving silence. Guards patrolled the grounds, and torches cast a flickering light against the stone walls. Ancient trees thronged outside, their branches cloaking the paths that had been tranquil during the day in thick and eerie shadows.

Perhaps it was the drop in temperature, or perhaps the sinister scenery—a shiver went up the young eunuch's spine. He dared not rub his arms with the emperor nearby, but he could feel the fine hairs on his body standing on end.

At last they approached the main hall. Bright light spilled from the cracks in the tightly shut doors and windows. On a blizzard-filled night like this, leaving the doors open would only extinguish the candles.

The young eunuch was about to step forward to announce the emperor's presence when the emperor held up a hand. He took a few steps forward himself and pushed the door open a crack. It was late at night, yet Master Lingzang was still in the hall. The emperor didn't wish to disturb him if he was attending to important matters. He peered carefully inside.

What he saw left him frozen with terror—it was a sight he'd never forget for the rest of his life.

Master Lingzang was indeed in the main hall. Though the hall was lit by bright candlelight, the abbot was the only one there. He sat cross-legged on the floor with a basin placed before him. The vessel was wide and shallow, like the paper-burning basins used in funerary rites, but this wasn't what caught the emperor's attention. He'd glimpsed something far more horrific.

The basin was filled to the rim with bloody entrails. Master Lingzang scooped up gory handfuls, his head lowered as he shoved them into his mouth and chewed. Blood dribbled from the corners of his lips. As the emperor watched, he paused and licked the blood from his hands as if he hadn't had enough.

The emperor's mind went blank. Was he still trapped in his nightmares? He staggered back a few steps, then his legs gave out and he fell to the ground. The young eunuch dove to help him but was dragged down as well.

"Your Majesty? What's wrong? Your Majesty!"

Through the narrow crack in the door, he saw Master Lingzang's head turn toward him. A twisted grin split his blood-smeared face. Trembling in fear, the emperor forced a cry past his frozen throat: "Help, someone! Come quickly!"

As his voice rang out, the sounds of shouts and the distant clash of swords rose from the direction of the monks' quarters by the back courtyard. The emperor whipped his head around. "What's happening?!"

"Protect His Majesty!" The cry went up as the Imperial Guards around the main hall gathered swiftly before him. The emperor finally felt some small measure of relief.

"Shao Yong," he ordered the captain. "Go find out what's going on!" He paused, then pointed at the hall. "And there. Go in and bring out Master Lingzang!"

The guards dispersed, leaving a small group clustered around the emperor, scanning their surroundings with wary expressions.

Something terrible had happened. But the emperor wasn't worried yet. Yu Qingze and the others were still present—these were men who'd fought their way out of the battlefield, famous generals who'd slaughtered countless enemies. Whatever

petty ruffians were causing trouble here were no match for them.

Yet just as the thought occurred to him, the guards surrounding the emperor suddenly cried out and crumpled to the ground. Before the emperor could react, two men in black grabbed him and dragged him into the hall.

Chapter 182

THE MEN BOUND the emperor's hands and pushed him through the doors. What awaited him wasn't the brightly lit interior, nor Master Lingzang's terrifying and blood-splattered visage. The doors and windows had been flung open, and a blustering wind gusted in, snuffing out the rows of candles.

A layer of black fabric was pulled roughly over his eyes and the world went dark. Even the sounds of fighting faded away as he was led along, until at last he heard nothing.

What was happening?! After calling out for his men twice to no avail, he realized with a cold finality that he was completely at the enemy's mercy. Yet even now he had an emperor's dignity. He tamped down his fear and panic, silently clenching his teeth to stop himself from crying out.

Suddenly he felt his arms being released. He yanked off the blindfold but found himself alone, again greeted by a vast expanse of darkness. He looked around, completely lost. The darkness concealed everything; he had no idea where he was.

A thin whine echoed in his ears, faint and indistinct, like the cries of wronged souls drifting from beyond the gates of the underworld. The sound was chilling, awakening sorrow and terror in the deepest parts of his heart.

The emperor made no attempt to move forward. Considering his current plight, remaining still was the wisest course of action. If the enemy had laid traps in the dark, stumbling around might put him in grave danger.

Until the enemy made a move, he wouldn't make one either.

The emperor could hear his own breathing—even his heartbeat seemed deafening. His heart pounded faster and faster, and his eardrums pulsed in time. He tried to swallow but found his mouth parched. This silent torture seemed to go on without end, until even the emperor's considerable patience reached its limits. Just as he was about to break down and speak, someone blew lightly on the nape of his neck. A gentle sigh sounded behind him.

The emperor froze. "What kind of monster are you? If you bear me some grudge, face me directly. These tricks are the tactics of a petty villain—they deserve only ridicule!" he snapped.

"Your Majesty's unwavering composure in the face of danger is truly admirable."

The stranger's voice was soft and slow, a stark contrast to the emperor's harsh and hurried scolding. Though there was still no light, he seemed capable of perceiving the emperor's every movement. The emperor attempted to shift away but found himself frozen in place. He steadied himself. "Who are you?"

The stranger didn't beat around the bush. "Xiao Lü."

"The Pavilion Leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai?" Though the emperor's voice held a note of surprise, this wasn't wholly unexpected.

"I'm sure Your Majesty has heard my name from both Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu." Xiao Lü chuckled and snapped his fingers.

A point of light flared to life in front of the emperor. It gradually expanded into a glowing mass, then split into several scattered clusters that darted to the edges of the space. In the faint light, the emperor's surroundings began to take shape.

Xiao Lü stood before him with a girl at his side. The Pavilion Leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai was young and handsome, and the girl was lovely. Standing together, the pair seemed a perfect match.

It was difficult to imagine that this young man, with his gentle face and a smile curving his lips, had amassed such immense power in the last few years. He'd skillfully gathered masters and forged alliances with the Southern dynasty, the Göktürks, and even Goguryeo. While he'd yet to pose a significant threat to the Sui dynasty, he'd become a thorn in their side, both in the shadows and out in the open.

But the girl's face was one the emperor couldn't have been more familiar with. "Yuwen Eying?!" he exclaimed in shock.

Though his granddaughter bore a surname for which he had no fondness, out of consideration for his daughter, Princess Leping, the emperor had been careful never to mistreat the girl. Who could have imagined she'd been secretly conspiring with the Thirteen Floors, plotting to overthrow the Sui dynasty from behind her mother's skirts?

The girl smiled. "My name is Yuwen Yihuan, Your Majesty. I'm sure you know this as well: All those years ago, the princess gave birth to twin daughters."

The emperor understood at once. "You are the child who died? But you didn't die!"

Yuwen Yihuan nodded. "Fortunately, my foster brother came to my rescue or I'd have become a vengeful ghost wandering the underworld."

But she was not a ghost, and so there was no reason to fear her. The emperor felt guilt toward the Yuwen clan, but the feeling did not extend to this Yuwen Yihuan. He quickly composed himself, his voice regaining its presence and authority. "Then I must thank you for rescuing Huan-niang, Pavilion Leader Xiao. I was unaware of her existence until this moment, but now that I know, I could never allow her to remain lost in the world outside the palace. Pavilion Leader Xiao, you provided for Yihuan and cared for her. I won't hesitate to reward you with gold and silver, a high office, and whatever else you desire. So why must you oppose the court time and time again? Is it worth it to harm others for so little benefit?"

"Your Majesty lives up to your reputation," said Xiao Lü with a smile. "You immediately switched from defense to offense, trying to win me over. Is Your Majesty truly willing to offer me whatever I desire?"

The emperor sensed the trap within his words but didn't bat an eye. "That would depend on whether I can afford to offer it."

Xiao Lü burst into laughter. "Your Majesty is wealthy beyond measure. What could you possibly not afford? Isn't it more about whether you're willing to offer it?

"The highest authority must be held by those with virtue."

Xiao Lü's mouth twisted with mockery. "*Virtue*? What virtue does the emperor of Southern Chen possess?"

"His ancestors possessed virtue," said the emperor coolly. "Without virtue, talent, and timing, how else could they have attained the throne? Once they are on the throne, if they don't continue cultivating virtue, the blessings of heaven won't last for

long."

"So Your Majesty claims to be talented and virtuous, and thus have the Mandate of Heaven?" Xiao Lü said with the shadow of a smile.

"I've been curious about you for a while," said the emperor. "Your achievements are sufficient to place you among the visionaries and great men. You gathered a group of talented individuals and proved you have the ability to lead them. Why not apply your prodigious talents to righteous pursuits? Why insist on these shadowy, underhanded schemes?"

Yang Jian had been born a wealthy member of the nobility. He could have lived a life of comfort and luxury, but he'd nursed grand ambitions. Between his own aspirations and Emperor Wu's suspicion toward him, he gradually found himself walking down the path of usurpation, unable to retreat. But since his ascension, he'd governed with wisdom and benevolence, ensuring peace both within and without his nation and reforming the previous dynasty's failed policies. While he might have wronged the Yuwen clan, he'd always done right by the common people—thus he questioned Xiao Lü with confidence.

"Who decides what is righteous?" Xiao Lü replied. "Those who steal bread to fill their bellies are punished, but those who steal kingdoms to feed their ambitions become lords. That's all there is to it."

"Why try to provoke me?" asked the emperor solemnly. "I acknowledge that I stole the throne from the Yuwen family. But if Yuwen Yun had governed with sincerity and valued talent, his nation wouldn't have fallen into my hands. The illusions I saw earlier were your doing, were they not? Even if you're unhappy with me, Master Lingzang is innocent. I beseech you to let him go."

"Fear not; we'd never harm an enlightened monk who's pure of soul," said Xiao Lü. "But it's no use trying to delay, Your Majesty. Do you know where we are?"

"I did want to ask."

"We are inside the belly of the Buddha."

Daxingshan Temple's most famous feature was its Mahavira Hall. Inside was a gigantic Buddha statue over fifty feet tall, cast during the Jin dynasty. It had narrowly escaped destruction during Emperor Wu's reign, and after Yang Jian ascended, he'd renovated the temple and had the statue gilded. The emperor had previously admired the statue from up close, but he'd never realized its hollow interior was so vast—or even that it was accessible.

If Xiao Lü and Yuwen Yihuan had been hiding within the statue, it was no surprise they'd been overlooked despite the strict security and thorough searches both inside and outside the temple. The emperor considered further. If Xiao Lü and Yuwen Yihuan hadn't entered from inside the temple, did that mean there was a passage beneath the statue that led outside?

Xiao Lü watched the expressions playing across the emperor's face and smiled. "Your Majesty is a brilliant man. I trust you've guessed how we arrived."

"Even if you've hidden a great army in here, it would be impossible to bring them in with no one the wiser," the emperor said.

"Your Majesty misunderstands. The sounds of fighting you heard from the back courtyard weren't from my men. That was your own men slaughtering each other."

“Impossible!”

At this point there was no more need to hide anything. “The gu was in the ginger soup. As I’m sure you’ve guessed, there are a number of secret passages hidden beneath these Buddha statues. I had men light a hallucination-inducing incense within them, which wafted out through the openings in the statues. Sandalwood incense is a strong scent; once my incense mingled with it, it was hard to detect.”

The emperor’s expression darkened. “So you made Master Lingzang do those awful deeds with this incense?”

Xiao Lü smiled. “Everything you saw was an illusion. Lingzang is devoted to the impermanence of Buddhism; his heart bears no shadow. The incense is useless on him. All I did was induce him to lie down and rest quietly for a while. After all, my true target was you, Your Majesty.”

He turned his head and called into the darkness. “Are you ready?”

The emperor instinctively followed his gaze. His eyes grew wide.

A figure stepped forth from the darkness. The man’s appearance, stature, clothing, and mannerisms were identical to his own.

Xiao Lü smiled brightly. “How long do you think you can delay, Your Majesty?”

So this was why Xiao Lü had so patiently entertained his questions. The impostor had watched everything, observing the subtle nuances of his voice and expressions.

“Almost there,” the impostor said. “Please let him speak a few more words, Pavilion Leader.”

His voice sounded like it had come from the emperor’s own lips. The emperor burned with fury. He’d never expected his enemy to have this card up his sleeve.

“You only have yourself to blame, Your Majesty.” Xiao Lü’s voice was laden with regret. “Your security is too tight—every time my men tried to infiltrate the palace, they were identified by the Jiejian Bureau. I had no choice but to resort to more unconventional methods. Rest assured: Once this man takes your place, he’ll issue an edict saying you’re abdicating and make arrangements for the rest of the Yang clan. Your esteemed name will remain untarnished. The history books will still call Your Majesty a wise emperor who established the imperial examinations and subdued the Göktürks.”

The emperor had resolved not to say another word, but at this, he couldn’t contain himself. “Who will believe this impostor?! Do you take the empress and ministers for fools?!”

Xiao Lü smiled. “The confidants who supported your ascension, such as Liu Fang and Zheng Yi, are already dead. Then there’s the solar eclipse—a clear sign that the heavens themselves deem you guilty for usurping the Yuwen clan’s throne. Your Majesty spent three days in repentance at Daxingshan Temple, then resolved to follow Emperor Wu’s example and abdicate to become a monk. What does it matter if the empress and ministers don’t believe it? It only matters that the common folk do. The Prince of Qin is already in contact with the commander of the imperial army—between them, they’ll focus on consolidating military power and earning the trust of the people. As for Empress Dugu, it’s unfortunate that she’s so ill. She should

continue to rest."

"You're delusional!" the emperor roared.

"Enough," said the impostor.

He stepped up to the emperor and reached out to touch his face, stroking it as if trying to work out the structure of his bones. A chill ran down the emperor's spine. His face filled with horror, but he found himself unable to move.

"I. I. I." The impostor repeated the word, adjusting his tone each time. Slowly he erased the last subtle differences between himself and the original, until they sounded completely identical.

"I am Yang Jian. Yang Jian is me." The impostor gave a small smile that chilled the depths of Yang Jian's heart.

It's over, he thought in despair. The Buddha statue would muffle all sound within it. No matter how he screamed, no one would come to his rescue.

Throughout the ages, death had always been the one inevitability no will could surmount. But the emperor now realized that what he feared most wasn't the inevitability of his death. It was not knowing what Xiao Lü would do with his face and identity when he was gone.

In the darkness behind him, a silent hand stretched out. It wasn't the hand of a savior, but that of the reaper come to claim him.

A dark figure rushed forward, ready to strike the fatal acupoint on the emperor's back. Xiao Lü's smile vanished as he sprang between them. "Stop!"

Though he'd arranged for someone to impersonate the emperor of Sui, the real one was still useful to him. He had no intention of killing him yet. But the newcomer was merciless—they'd gone for the emperor's life. Xiao Lü exchanged several blows with the newcomer before he recognized him.

"Tu'an Qinghe! We've never interfered in each other's business before. Why are you starting now?!"

Tu'an Qinghe said nothing. He pushed Xiao Lü aside and drew his sword, slashing at the emperor. His saber qi multiplied a thousandfold as it flew from his blade, rushing toward both the real and fake emperors.

Xiao Lü refused to let Tu'an Qinghe succeed, but he could only save one. What he wanted was a puppet. If he was forced to pick, the impostor was more useful—he darted toward the fake.

The emperor watched helplessly as the saber glare tore toward him, cold and sharp and ready to extinguish his life. His chest ached, as if preemptively feeling the pain. In that critical instant, someone grabbed his shoulder and yanked him backward.

What lay behind him wasn't the solid ground he'd imagined. A deep pit seemed to have materialized out of thin air. The emperor teetered on the edge for only a breath before plummeting down into the dark. Yet in that brief moment, he caught a glimpse of the one who'd rescued him: It was the young monk he'd seen beside Master Lingzang.

"I practically became a Buddha myself with how long my venerable self waited for you people to show yourselves!" The monk laughed heartily, instantly giving away his identity.

Xiao Lü and Tu’an Qinghe had been engaged in ferocious combat, but the moment Feng Xiao appeared, they set aside their fight and flew toward him.

Feng Xiao deflected their strikes with a wave of his sleeves, then grabbed the impostor and held him up as a shield as he slid backward. With a smooth flip of his hand, he tossed the fake emperor after the real one into the pit.

Dazed from the fall, the emperor was startled when another body landed on him, nearly crushing him to death.

Chapter 183

FENG XIAO HADN'T TOSSED the emperor into a hole for no reason. He knew the alliance between Xiao Lü and Kuhezhen was tenuous. They were united by their shared desire to overthrow the Sui dynasty, yet the closer they came to their goal, the more unstable their partnership would become.

This was an opening he could exploit. One side might easily turn on the other—or they might not. But Feng Xiao's faction was exposed, out in the open; any move they made would be observed. All he could do was wait.

During their initial discussions, almost everyone in the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus had agreed it would be better to take the initiative: They should search the city and cancel the Buddhist ceremony, not sit on their hands and pray for their enemies to destroy each other. Ultimately, it was Cui Buqu who commanded everyone to lie low and refrain from taking reckless action.

After the incident at the Prince of Qin's banquet, the Jiejian Bureau had discovered several key clues to the case. They acted as if they'd found nothing and put on a show of being confused and panicked in order to coax the enemy into letting down their guard—until today.

Cui Buqu's grasp of human nature, Feng Xiao thought, was indeed unmatched. Tu'an Qinghe and Xiao Lü might not have made names for themselves in the jianghu, but they were undoubtedly peerless martial artists. Xiao Lü's injuries had yet to heal, which put him at a slight disadvantage, but if he and Tu'an Qinghe worked together, even the arrogant Feng Xiao dared not claim he could achieve a decisive victory.

The impostor emperor thus became the key. The impostor was crucial to Xiao Lü's plan. He couldn't let anything happen to him. The moment the impostor was thrown into the pit, Xiao Lü abandoned Feng Xiao and rushed forward to rescue him.

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The emperor had never thought there was such a vast world beneath Daxingshan Temple.

The bottom of the pit was pitch-black; still crushed under the weight of the fake emperor, he groped at the muddy ground beneath him. The soil was tightly packed, almost certainly the work of some bygone construction project. As far as the emperor could recall, Daxingshan Temple had undergone renovations twice: once before Emperor Wu banned Buddhism, and once again after Great Sui's establishment. But both had concerned only the buildings on the surface, reinforcing the temple without delving down into the foundations. These packed-earth passages had to be older than the Zhou dynasty.

He shoved the body on top of him aside and struggled up. The man seemed to have passed out. Even in the dark, the emperor could tell this was the fake—but he couldn't make out the man's true identity.

His first thought was to kill him. But he had no weapon to hand, and he was exhausted. All he managed was a couple dull kicks. The emperor panted harshly, his

anger still simmering. How was he supposed to escape this place? Could Feng Xiao extricate himself and save him? What was even happening up there?

His mind was in a fog; there was too much he didn't know.

He waited a long time, but no one else dropped down from above. He had no choice but to take matters into his own hands: Using the wall to support himself, the emperor straightened with great effort and began to slide himself along the rugged stone.

He groped along for a while before noticing something. When he paused to carefully explore the wall a second time, he realized that what he'd touched wasn't merely rough earth. It was a carved mural.

By touch alone, he guessed that it depicted galloping horses. Some people were leading them, while several others stood with cupped hands. A bodhisattva sat upon a throne of lotus flowers.

This was no construction tunnel—it was an underground labyrinth.

The emperor knew a fair amount about Daxingshan Temple thanks to his friendship with Master Lingzang, but he'd never known there was a maze like this underneath it. If it stretched out under the entire temple complex, the labyrinth must be massive, and was probably riddled with traps and dangers.

Cold sweat sprang up on the emperor's back. He stopped walking. Perhaps it would be more prudent to go back aboveground and confront Xiao Lü. But he didn't know the way back, and there was no guarantee anyone would come to rescue him.

Haaa… Haaa…

A familiar sound echoed around him, coming in starts and stops from all directions at once. It resembled the wail of an infant or the howl of a wildcat, filled with deep resentment and boundless hatred. The emperor froze, straining to discern the source of the noise.

A hand landed gently on his shoulder.

All the blood rushed to his head as he twisted away, trying to shake off the hand gripping him. A voice cut through the darkness—one that was exceedingly familiar. "It's me, Your Majesty."

The words were followed by several coughs. *Cui Buqu!*

The emperor's heart was pounding so fiercely that when he tried to speak, he also choked and began to cough. The sound echoed in the darkness. *How big is this place?* the emperor wondered.

Another voice rang out. "Your Majesty."

This was a familiar voice as well: the deputy chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, Zhangsun Bodhi. The emperor calmed his racing heart and gasped, "They—"

"Shh!" In an incredible breach of propriety, Zhangsun Bodhi clapped his hand over the emperor's mouth, cutting him off mid-word.

"There's a monster in here, Your Majesty. It's best to speak as little as possible," Cui Buqu said in a low voice.

The emperor's heart leapt into his throat once more. "What kind of monster? How did you get down here?"

In fact, before the ceremony, Cui Buqu had instructed Qin Miaoyu and Ming Yue to enter the palace and search the library for Daxingshan Temple's building plans.

The palace library housed a vast collection of books, some as old as the Han dynasty. Although many of the oldest scrolls had been lost to various wars, a sizable number survived. Locating the plans for a three-hundred-year-old temple in a single night was no simple task.

But Ming Yue and Qin Miaoyu had succeeded, locating the plans of the temple amid a pile of old papers. They weren't the originals from the Jin dynasty, which had presumably been lost sometime during the wars and the Jin dynasty's move south. The earliest preserved versions were from the Later Qin dynasty, and detailed the temple's construction history and architectural design. As Daxingshan Temple had been renovated several times since then, these preserved plans differed greatly from the temple as they now knew it.

Qin Miaoyu hadn't understood why Cui Buqu went to such lengths to acquire the plans. She thought he was grasping at straws—until he pointed out a particular passage in the documents: *When the temple's construction began, the emperor ordered the workers to dig an underground labyrinth to protect the eight treasures. This underground palace is much larger than Mahavira Hall. It connects the inside to the outside, uniting above and below.*

Just a few stilted lines, short and without context, but they left her scratching her head. What were "inside" and "outside"? And what did it mean to "unite above and below"?

Cui Buqu knew the emperor would be in the Mahavira Hall during the morning and afternoon ceremonies. He'd be listening to sutras and engaged in worship while his attendants and ministers stood to the side praying and offering incense. Xiao Lü's attention was sure to be completely focused on the emperor during this time. Thus, earlier in the day, Cui Buqu had brought Zhangsun and the others to quietly search the area around the temple. All their efforts paid off when they discovered a hidden tunnel beneath a pile of debris in a narrow alley bordering Jingshan Ward.

There were several layers of earth beneath the bricks—the passage hadn't been used recently. It seemed Xiao Lü's faction hadn't noticed it at all.

Upon entering, they discovered that the labyrinth below was just as expansive as Daxingshan Temple above. It had a series of branching connections arranged according to the bagua, a Daoist symbol consisting of eight trigrams arranged in an octagon. Each of its eight sides held a chest containing the sarira of a high monk from the past. All manner of venomous creatures surrounded these precious chests, guarding the treasures within.

Cui Buqu and Zhangsun Bodhi plunged into the labyrinth and navigated the various obstacles together. Between them—thanks to both Cui Buqu's expertise in arrays and mechanisms as well as Zhangsun Bodhi's martial prowess—they managed to evade all the traps and reach the emperor.

But the emperor no longer remembered where he'd fallen down, and now there was an even greater danger skulking nearby: a monster glowering at them from the darkness, ready to pounce and tear into its prey.

"We're not sure what kind of creature it is, only that it's dangerous," said Cui Buqu. "It's bizarre yet intelligent. Even Zhangsun was not its match; we fled from it.

We must prevent it from finding us again."

Zhangsun bit his lip but said nothing. Cui Buqu's description was cryptic. He hadn't told the emperor that the creature wasn't just ferocious—its appearance was horrifying. Even Zhangsun had no desire to recall what he'd seen. He was acutely aware of the great danger they were in, and less confident than ever that he could bring them all out to safety.

Chapter 184

THE EMPEROR WAS QUICK to adapt to the situation. After listening to their explanation, he gathered his thoughts and forced himself to breathe deeply. Moments ago he'd been isolated and surrounded by enemies—at least now he had two companions by his side.

Following their lead, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "What should we do now, Cui-xiansheng?"

Another emperor might have balked at taking commands from his subjects. But Yang Jian was under no illusions: It would be impossible to escape by himself. Zhangsun may have been the martial artist among them, but the one he trusted most was still Cui Buqu.

Cui Buqu, too, dispensed with the usual courtesies. "Your Majesty, can you remember how you got here?"

The emperor flushed. He'd been in such a panic after falling it hadn't occurred to him to make note of his route. "Let me think."

He had an excellent memory. Thinking back over the stone walls he'd touched, he said, "Follow me."

Zhangsun lit no fire, lest it draw the attention of eyes within the darkness. Instead, he placed his hand on the emperor's arm to guide him. Cui Buqu followed a step behind.

The emperor felt along the carvings, recalling the mural he'd found. Men on horse- and camelback rode from far and wide to pay their respects to the bodhisattva, who sat high on a throne of lotuses. The bodhisattva's fingers were bent in a mudra, their pose exuding an air of untouchable serenity. Auspicious clouds were depicted in the mural; the emperor's fingers quickly found their stylized whorls. Above the clouds was the bodhisattva he recalled.

Now more confident, he pushed forward. "There was a man impersonating me. He was unconscious just up ahead."

"Stay here, Your Majesty. Let me check." Zhangsun Bodhi left the emperor to Cui Buqu, who put a hand on his shoulder, and strode toward the spot the emperor had indicated.

"There's no one here, Your Majesty."

How can that be? The emperor couldn't believe it. The impostor had been out cold—how could he have woken so quickly? Even if he had, he should have made some kind of noise they'd have heard. He took a few involuntary steps forward, as if to verify the impostor's absence himself. Cui Buqu's hand slipped from his shoulder.

"Your Majesty, there are many hidden passages here. We should stay together," Cui Buqu cautioned.

"That man mimicked my voice and appearance so flawlessly even I might have mistaken him for myself. If he escapes, it will spell trouble."

The emperor bent and began to search his surroundings, but found nothing under his fingers beyond coarse sand and stones. He furrowed his brow. *Impossible*.

He distinctly remembered the impostor emperor falling and landing on top of him. He'd shoved the impostor away, and his head had struck the stone wall. He'd probably bled.

The faint scent of blood did linger in the air. The emperor searched again and felt a small damp patch. So this was the place—but then, where was the fake emperor?

"He must be nearby," the emperor muttered. Perhaps he'd woken in a daze and silently found a place to hide.

There was no reply from Cui Buqu and Zhangsun.

"Cui-xiansheng? Zhangsun?"

How could this be? Just moments ago, Cui Buqu and Zhangsun had been a few steps behind him. They couldn't have failed to hear him. He thrust his hands out again and felt something warm. It felt like a bare human foot, the skin rough and craggy as scales.

Drip, drip.

Water fell from above and dropped onto the emperor's forehead. He reached up unthinkingly to wipe it away. His fingers came away sticky, stinking of copper.

Not water. Blood.

Wind rushed past his ears, and a light flared behind him. The emperor turned to see Zhangsun holding a torch. He stiffened in realization and slowly, jerkily looked up at the figure clinging to the ceiling above him.

A person. No—it could no longer be called that.

The creature had human limbs, but its hair was completely gone. Its face and scalp were crimson, shiny and swollen as if scalded with boiling water. Its skin was riddled with countless holes, through which black and white worms crawled. Where eyes had once resided, there were only two hollow sockets filled with flickering black flames. Its limbs were covered in scales, and its nails were long, blackened, and extraordinarily sharp. The monster stared at the emperor, who froze like a rabbit beneath the glare of a venomous snake.

All the hair on his neck stood up as he looked at those worms. He yearned to shuck his skin and flee, to leave this place so he didn't have to keep looking at the thing. He couldn't speak—all he managed was a wordless gasp.

The emperor thought he'd seen it all. He'd never imagined a creature like this could exist. No wonder Zhangsun and Cui Buqu had been so cryptic; no one could maintain their composure before such a sight. Belatedly, the emperor realized his hand was still resting on the monster's foot. His soul almost fled his body in terror, and he yanked his hand back.

The monster growled deep in its throat and lunged. It moved as fast as lightning, swiping its sharp nails at the crown of the emperor's head. A gust of rancid wind rushed toward the emperor. He had no time to evade.

He was going to die.

The thought had barely formed when flames erupted between him and the monster. Zhangsun had thrown the torch while the emperor stood stunned. The monster recoiled in pain as the torch struck its head.

"Lord Chief!" Zhangsun Bodhi shouted.

There was no response—Cui Buqu was nowhere to be seen.

The torch fell to the ground, illuminating a suspiciously large pool of blood. Yet it failed to reveal Cui Buqu.

The monster gave a low roar and barreled toward them. Zhangsun shoved the emperor behind him and threw out his palm, pushing the creature back with a blast of wind. He was wary of getting too close—Cui Buqu had warned him that the worms crawling over the monster were deadly. If even one or two were to enter his body, he'd be afflicted by the gu.

The gu worms didn't take over their host at once. They lay dormant within the body, waiting for their moment to strike. Those who managed to excise the worms in time, like Pei Jingzhe, were few. Most ended up like the residents of Yandang Mountain Estate: driven to madness by the gu invading their minds. At that stage, there was no cure.

This made it much more difficult to fight. Zhangsun could have fled with the emperor, but they still had no idea where Cui Buqu had gone.

The emperor plastered himself to the wall, afraid to move, and called out again for Cui Buqu. There was no response.

The monster fought savagely. Zhangsun was forced to expend more and more energy to block each strike. Suddenly he realized this creature had its own cunning. It'd lured them into the depths of the labyrinth, and now it sought to exhaust his true qi.

He couldn't stall any longer. The emperor was still beside him, and his safety had to come first. That was both Zhangsun's duty and Cui Buqu's order. Gritting his teeth, Zhangsun shoved the monster back a few steps. Then he seized the emperor, and they sprinted off down the passageway.

The monster followed them into the boundless dark.

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Cui Buqu stood in silence with his back to the cold stone wall. He could feel the contours of the stone carvings through his clothes; it was a depiction of a Buddhist tale, the Astasena listening to Buddhist scriptures. But he couldn't make a sound around the hand tightly gripping his throat.

The face of the person choking him was inches from his own. His breath was light; the occasional puff of warm air fanned over Cui Buqu's face. His fingers were slender yet strong, their skin dry and cool. Cui Buqu couldn't make out his silhouette in the darkness, but he knew who it was. This person was using their left hand. A number of jianghu practitioners were left-handed, but there was only one both present here and hostile to him.

Xiao Lü.

Only when the monster had chased Zhangsun and the emperor into the distance did Xiao Lü loosen his grip. He struck Cui Buqu's acupoint, rendering him immobile. "We meet again, Chief Cui."

"It's a pleasure, Pavilion Leader Xiao."

They greeted each other like close companions, old friends reunited after years apart. There was no hint of animosity. But Cui Buqu guessed that, if it were up to Xiao Lü, he'd never have come down here. It seemed Feng Xiao throwing the fake emperor down had forced his hand—Cui Buqu could vaguely make out the man slumped nearby.

Cui Buqu coughed a few times. "What was that creature just now?"

"You're so sure I know?" It seemed Xiao Lü was still in the mood to joke. "Chief Cui, you overestimate me."

"This underground labyrinth was built to house the eight treasures. Booby traps and various poisons make sense. That creature doesn't. That thing is no beast; it's a living person who's been cast into a pool of gu. After forty-nine days, their flesh was perforated and the gu eroded and took control of their body. Now they're a walking corpse driven solely by the urge to kill."

Human gu couldn't be made from just anyone. The host had to have a strong physique, preferably that of a martial artist, to withstand the relentless waves of gu burrowing through skin and muscle and into their organs. They could only watch helplessly as their body was riddled with holes until they finally died in agony. Nurturing a monster so sinister and deadly demanded no small effort from its creator.

Xiao Lü was silent a moment. "That human gu was once the head disciple of the Nanhua Sect, Song Yuntao."

Cui Buqu was stunned. "Kuhezhen has only been in the Central Plains for a few months. Song Yuntao has been missing for over three years. How did he fall into a Göktürk prince's hands?"

Xiao Lü sighed. "At the time, the Nanhua Sect was embroiled in internal strife. The sect leader remarried a beautiful young woman, but she fell in love with the head disciple, Song Yuntao. The leader and his wife clashed, and the sect was fragmented. Alone, Song Yuntao set out beyond the Great Wall to search for his shifu. Nothing more was heard from him—a terrible pity. He had great potential and could have revitalized the Nanhua Sect. But fate laughed at him, and he perished."

"Were you involved with this, Pavilion Leader Xiao?"

"If I said I wasn't, would you believe me?"

"I would," said Cui Buqu coolly. "You have no scruples, but you're not a liar."

Xiao Lü smiled. "If only you were willing to abandon Sui, you and I would surely become companions capable of reading each other's thoughts."

Cui Buqu ignored this comment. "How did you discover this place?"

"Lady Ashina."

Cui Buqu needed only a moment to recall everything connected to this name. "The empress?"

"Correct. Fifteen years ago, the daughter of Muqan Khaghan, Lady Ashina, married Yuwen Yong."

The Göktürks were Buddhists, and Lady Ashina had been no exception. At the time, Buddhism's expansive influence had begun to threaten the emperor's authority, and Yuwen Yong ordered a crackdown on the religion. He expelled monks from the country and even destroyed several sections of Daxingshan Temple—it was this last that led to the discovery of the entrance to the labyrinth. Upon learning of it, Lady

Ashina had ordered an investigation. But those who entered never returned, and the investigation came to an unsatisfying end.

The entrance to the maze was sealed soon after, but it remained on Lady Ashina's mind. She ordered Daxingshan Temple's plans collected from the library and sent to the Khaganate for examination.

Cui Buqu furrowed his brow. "So the plans from the Jin dynasty ended up in the hands of the Göktürks, and from there made their way to Kuhezhen?"

"Mm," said Xiao Lü. "Back when the temple was first constructed, the Buddha statues were crafted from wooden sticks and bent-reed frames, then secured with a base of white clay and painted. The only exception was the great Buddha in the Mahavira Hall, which is hollow and contains the entrance to the labyrinth. I'd already visited the temple long before your emperor sealed it off."

Cui Buqu had guessed the enemy would disguise themselves as monks or the emperor's attendants to infiltrate the temple. He'd never anticipated something like an entire secret labyrinth.

Xiao Lü seemed to sense his thoughts. "Surprising, isn't it? But I didn't expect the Göktürks to choose this moment to turn against me. I thought Kuhezhen would at least wait until I had the situation in hand before making his move."

But Kuhezhen clearly wasn't operating on the same principles. To him, there was little difference between Xiao Lü and the emperor of Sui: Both were men he could use to further his plans of sowing discord in the Central Plains.

"Well then, Pavilion Leader Xiao, we're in the same boat. It'd be wise to cooperate, at least until we're out of the labyrinth."

Xiao Lü smiled. "I agree. Please go ahead."

"Do you know the way?"

"I don't," said Xiao Lü. "Kuhezhen never showed me the plans. I must trouble you to guide me."

Cui Buqu didn't answer. He merely started walking.

Xiao Lü had tapped the fake emperor's mute acupoint earlier. He lifted the silent man easily to his feet and followed close behind Cui Buqu. The passage was deep and dark, the only sound the tap of their footsteps. The fake emperor, still dazed, stumbled as he walked, his footfalls unpleasantly discordant.

Though the fake emperor was a crucial part of his plan, Xiao Lü's treatment of him made it clear how little regard he had for him. This impostor couldn't be a high-ranking member of the Thirteen Floors. Perhaps he was truly only a puppet. What a puppet thought or felt about Xiao Lü was of no concern to him—it needed only to fulfill its role.

The three men edged along the wall, each harboring their own motives, each with their own agendas. Xiao Lü let Cui Buqu take the lead; if any danger arose, he could use him as a shield. But Cui Buqu made no comment. He walked slowly, memorizing each turn.

But he quickly realized this was futile. "The wall carvings are repeating," he said.

"What do you mean?" Xiao Lü arched a brow.

“When we started walking, I was touching a mural of the Astasena listening to sutras. Next was a mural of Prince Mahasattva’s sacrifice of himself to the tigers, then another tale about the crown prince retrieving treasures from the sea. But now the sequence is repeating.”

“Perhaps they are multiple copies of the same mural?”

“No. If they were copies, I’d find slight differences in the details. But I remember what I touched—they’re the same mural.”

They were going in circles.

Xiao Lü sighed. “I’m starting to regret not asking Kuhezhen for the plans to this labyrinth.”

Then again, even if he had asked, Kuhezhen might not have shared them.

Cui Buqu thought for a moment, then pulled out a torch and lit it. The darkness surrounding them was endless, the flame a tiny puddle of brightness. Still, by its light, they could see that they were at the edge of a circular hall. Standing in the center, not far from them, was a low stone pillar.

“If I’m not mistaken,” said Cui Buqu, “the center of the labyrinth symbolizes the yin and yang—heaven and earth, sun and moon. The eight stars around it embody the eight trigrams of the bagua. We passed one when we arrived—it must have been the xun trigram. As for this one—”

The central stone pillar shone brilliantly in the torchlight, its white jade surface shimmering with an ethereal and captivating glow. Cui Buqu took an involuntary step closer.

The fake emperor was similarly entranced. He staggered forward, moving even faster than Cui Buqu as he reached out to touch it. Even Xiao Lü almost lost himself. He took one step forward, then another. Just as he took his third, he halted in alarm.

Xiao Lü prided himself on his iron willpower. Even if a heavenly demoness were dancing seductively before him, Xiao Lu could close his eyes against the sight. But somehow that white jade tower was causing his self-restraint to unravel. How could this be?

It wasn’t that his will was weak—there was something wrong with the tower. He slammed his eyes shut.

Cui Buqu’s torch was guttering out, its flame flickering. In the wavering torchlight, the white jade tower seemed to emit a crimson glow, eerie and surreal.

“Get back!” Cui Buqu cried. The torch went out; everything was plunged into darkness.

A scream split the air.

If Xiao Lü had had the use of both hands, he might have grabbed both his companions. But he could only use one. Xiao Lü yanked Cui Buqu backward. By then, it was too late for the fake emperor.

Cui Buqu also reacted swiftly. As soon as Xiao Lü pulled him into his arms, he whipped out another torch and lit it. The torch hissed and flared, illuminating the fake emperor.

He was bound to the white tower by countless red threads. At least seven or eight were coiled around his head and neck, digging into his flesh so deeply that

blood welled up as they watched. The threads tightened, and the fake emperor's eyes bulged one final time in death.

Xiao Lü's and Cui Buqu's breaths stopped in their throats.

They were neither sheltered nor naive; both had witnessed countless horrors. Yet the death of the impostor was beyond their comprehension. Xiao Lü pulled on Cui Buqu's wrist to bring the torch closer, then took a few steps forward.

"The red threads are coming out of the tower." He dropped Cui Buqu's wrist and struck the pillar. It shattered under the force of his true qi, revealing a hollow interior. Here was the source of the threads: The place that must have once held a monk's sarira now housed a small, human-shaped puppet instead. Countless red threads wound around it, and the faint scent of sandalwood wafted toward them.

Touching the pillar had triggered the mechanism, releasing both the red threads and the entrancing fragrance. Even a true martial expert would struggle to escape its effect, let alone Xiao Lü's fake emperor. Cui Buqu had been close to the tower as well; if not for Xiao Lü's timely tug, he likely wouldn't have escaped unscathed.

Cui Buqu bent and examined the pillar, then straightened. "Someone's tampered with it. Releasing the human gu in here isn't the only thing Kuhezhen did. He's revamped the place."

Xiao Lü brushed his fingers over the impostor's neck.

"How is he?" asked Cui Buqu.

"Beyond saving," said Xiao Lü slowly.

With the fake emperor dead, Xiao Lü's plan had already partially failed. Cui Buqu should have felt victorious, but seeing as they were trapped here with no guarantee of making it out alive, it would be wise not to provoke Xiao Lü overmuch. Who was to say Xiao Lü wouldn't feed him to the human gu if he became angry enough? Cui Buqu coughed and said with feigned sympathy. "Ah. Be at peace."

The corner of Xiao Lü's mouth twitched. "It would have been more convincing if you hadn't said it."

Cui Buqu swiftly changed the subject. "Kuhezhen has turned this place of worship into a purgatory of his own making. We must find a way out, and quickly. Let's go."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he felt a jolt of alarm. Something had shifted beneath his feet.

Cui Buqu looked down. Fine fissures snaked through the earth beneath him. They widened rapidly, growing from the thickness of a finger to the width of a palm.

Xiao Lü grabbed Cui Buqu and leapt toward the wall. The ground beneath the jade pillar split as it collapsed, cracks radiating outward from the center of the chamber. Stones and dirt crumbled away beneath them as they clung to the wall.

Xiao Lü gave a muffled grunt. The hand gripping Cui Buqu's arm went limp, and they both plummeted down into the dark.

Chapter 185

NEITHER CUI BUQU NOR XIAO LÜ had known the labyrinth had an entire second floor beneath the first. In the blink of an eye, the situation had changed again. The ground beneath Cui Buqu's feet gave way, and he crashed to the floor below, landing heavily on his side.

Pain exploded through his body. He moaned before he could stop himself. His arm was probably broken, but the agony in his back was even worse. What was more, the fall had aggravated his symptoms; he began to cough nonstop, the taste of metal surging up his throat. He spat out two mouthfuls of blood.

The only sound in the darkness was harsh panting—both his own and Xiao Lü's. Cui Buqu was unable to pull himself up to check on his companion. All he could do was lie on his back and wait for the whirling shadows before his eyes to slow.

After a long while, he heard Xiao Lü say calmly, "You're dying."

He wasn't mocking or cursing Cui Buqu. He could hear it in his breathing. Cui Buqu's chest heaved, as if he was trying and failing to draw all the air he could into his body. His heart and lungs must have felt like they were aflame. It wasn't just Cui Buqu's organs that were burning up, but the scant bit of life left in him.

He'd been born with a fragile body, and his ailments had been aggravated by his circumstances. By all rights, Cui Buqu should have died long ago. Yet he'd insisted on dragging his sickly body along the boundary between life and death, borrowing a full thirty years of life from the heavens. But what was borrowed must one day be repaid. And for this man who defied his fate, the price was unbearable, bone-rending agony.

Xiao Lü understood Cui Buqu had spent those thirty years in perpetual suffering. He had never known a day of peace. Even on his good days, the tranquil existence of an ordinary person was forever beyond his reach.

What kept Cui Buqu going through this torment? This, Xiao Lü didn't understand. If Cui Buqu was doing everything for the sake of others, how was he able to hold on? It was a question he had always wanted Cui Buqu to answer. After all, their situations were almost identical, to the point that even now they appeared as eerie mirrors of each other.

When Cui Buqu replied, his voice was very quiet. "I know."

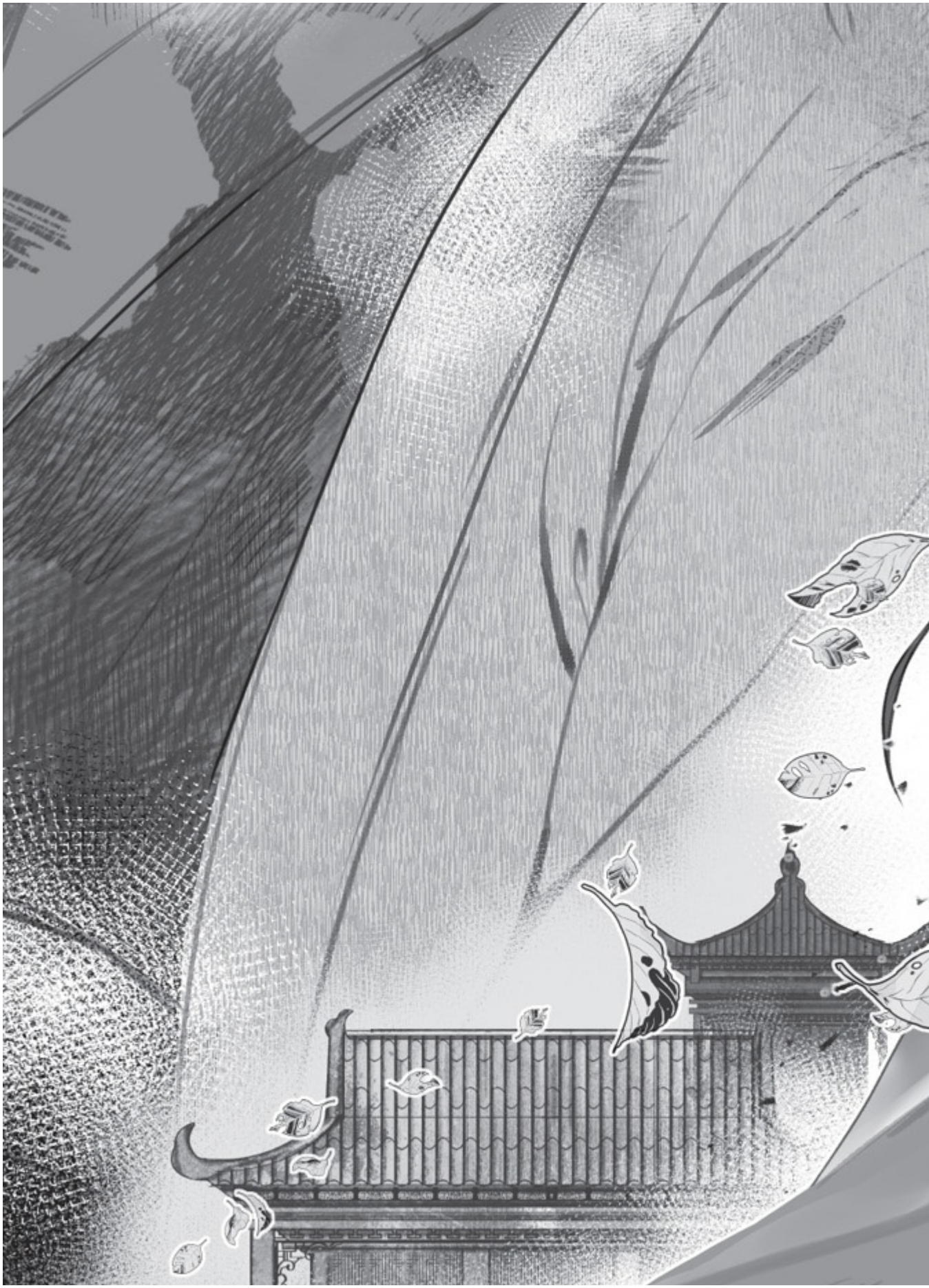
Had it not been for Xiao Lü's extraordinary hearing, he might have missed those words within the stillness of the cave. Cui Buqu succumbed to another long fit of coughing. Xiao Lü could almost picture him: hunched over, the coughs wrenching his body as though he was about to expel his very heart and lungs through his mouth.

Cui Buqu's life was like a guttering candle flame, poised to extinguish itself at any moment. Occasionally it flared brighter, but that was merely a fleeting illusion, a final blinding spark before inevitable death.

Unless heaven granted him some miracle…

But that was impossible.

He used every ounce of strength in his body to draw in his next breath, then his next, struggling against the searing pain in his chest as he clung to consciousness. Within the vast expanse of darkness and treachery, one person rose in his mind's eye.



Someone born into privilege, untouched by hardship and graced with both striking beauty and a flamboyant personality. Thanks to this man, Cui Buqu had discovered the true meaning of living in the sunlight. Each time he drew near, Cui Buqu felt a step closer to the exhilarating world of life—even if that man was neither gentle nor kind, and challenged him at every turn. He often found himself diverting his attention to deal with the traps this man set for him. It was a constant irritation, yet it breathed life into his days.

Of course he'd never share these thoughts with him. That man would spend the rest of his life gloating and rubbing it in his face. For the sake of his ears, it was better to say nothing.

He didn't know how long he drifted like this until the pain subsided enough for him to prop himself on his elbows. He laboriously pulled out a torch and lit it.

In the dim light, all he could see clearly was the ground beneath them, riddled with deep cracks. At first glance, it appeared the earth had fractured in some violent tremor, but a closer look revealed a more sinister origin. The cracks seemed alive, overlapping and swirling in an unending pattern.

Even a brief glimpse left him dizzy and on the verge of collapse in his current state. He steadied himself and averted his eyes. He could barely hold himself up as it was.

"There's an array on the ground…" He coughed again. "How much do you know about the labyrinth?"

Xiao Lü didn't respond. It struck Cui Buqu that Xiao Lü had been silent for some time now. "Xiao Lü?"

"Mm…" came a low grunt. Cui Buqu frowned.

"Are you all right?" If something happened to Xiao Lü, it'd be even harder to escape.

"I've been poisoned."

Xiao Lü's sigh floated over, so light Cui Buqu at first suspected he was lying. He paused. "How were you poisoned?"

"When we fell, there was poison on the walls. If you doubt me, come look for yourself."

Cui Buqu was silent.

Xiao Lü laughed. "What? You still think I'm lying to you at a time like this?"

"You know I'm dying," said Cui Buqu flatly. "It's taking all my strength just to talk to you."

Xiao Lü sighed once more. Slowly, he rose to his feet and approached Cui Buqu. They had fallen a little distance apart. He trod carefully, feeling his way forward with each step.

A sharp hiss erupted from the ground.

Cui Buqu raised his torch to see Xiao Lü leap up as spikes shot from the stone beneath his feet. Dodging the spikes should have posed no problem for Xiao Lü. Yet Cui Buqu could see a sluggishness to his movements, which were nowhere near as fluid as before. Xiao Lü evaded the spikes by a hair's breadth, narrowly avoiding being turned into a meat skewer. He arrived at Cui Buqu's side and slowly settled

down on the floor. His breathing was labored and shallow.

He stretched out his hand. In the flickering light, Cui Buqu could see the red and purple splotches on Xiao Lü's palm. Some were already beginning to turn black.

Stunned, Cui Buqu suddenly recalled how Xiao Lü had pulled him away from the jade pillar. When they'd fallen, he must have pushed off the wall with his palm. "Why didn't you expel the poison?"

Xiao Lü sighed. "Because I'm already suffering from another, deeper poison."

He used his blackening hand to roll up the sleeve of his other arm. A shriveled, twig-like arm emerged—emaciated and wrinkled, and as slender as a chopstick. Though Cui Buqu had seen it before, it sent a chill down his spine. An arm like that shouldn't belong to a living person, especially not a man like Xiao Lü. But that wasn't what Xiao Lü wanted to show him.

He continued to roll up his sleeve. Where his withered arm gradually thickened and transitioned to healthy flesh, the skin was tinged a sickly purple-black.

"What is it?"

"The poison I was born with. My martial training kept it suppressed over the years, but during my last fight with Feng Xiao, I sustained severe injuries and almost entered qi deviation. You must have sensed my injuries have yet to fully heal. My martial arts skills have only recovered to around six or seven-tenths of their original state; I can no longer suppress the poison."

The first poison had already begun to spread, and now Xiao Lü had been exposed to another. It was remarkable he'd avoided the spikes at all.

"What's the worst-case scenario?"

Xiao Lü smiled. "This is the worst-case scenario. There's only one road available to me: death."

"You could have chosen not to create this mess and concentrated on recovering instead," said Cui Buqu coldly.

"It's too late for that," said Xiao Lü. "After my seclusion failed, I had no illusions about the condition I was in. I couldn't break through in my martial arts, and the poison had already spread. I can't advance any further. No matter what I do, only death awaits me now. The best I can do is make sure my years of planning come to fruition before I pass away—I can fulfill my lifelong wish."

Cui Buqu sneered. "Your lifelong wish is to harm others!"

Xiao Lü began to cough. Perhaps the poison was acting up. He didn't respond to Cui Buqu but instead closed his eyes and began meditating to regulate his breathing.

Cui Buqu tossed him a porcelain vial, which he caught with a steady hand.

"Ice-fungus pills," said Cui Buqu. "They'll slow the spread of your poison. If you doubt me, you don't have to take them."

Xiao Lü opened the vial, sniffed its contents, and tilted his head back, emptying all the pills into his mouth. They were in the same boat. There was no reason to suspect each other.

Soon enough, Xiao Lü did feel stronger. "Your medicine is quite effective."

"Enough. Let's get out of here."

Xiao Lü took the torch from his hand and pulled out a long needle. He pierced the slim torch with it, then tossed it into the darkness. The needle arced through the air with the torch attached, then embedded itself in the stone wall on the opposite side of the cavern. Before the light snuffed out, both Cui Buqu and Xiao Lü caught a glimpse of the general shape of their surroundings.

Their faces showed identical expressions of disbelief.

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Feng Xiao and Tu'an Qinghe had been fighting for nearly half an hour. Neither could kill the other; even injuring their opponent was proving difficult. Tu'an Qinghe had quickly realized that Feng Xiao's martial arts had grown even more refined since their fight the previous night on Chang'an Street.

He was discomfited—martial arts depended not only on natural talent and a strong foundation of training but also on sudden, spontaneous leaps in insight. Even mediocre martial artists struggled to make such significant progress in a few days, never mind martial artists of their caliber. Progressing a step—even half a step—was excruciatingly difficult, and depended on timing, environment, and fortuitous encounters with mentors or opponents. Yet Feng Xiao had managed it. Either he'd held back during their previous confrontation, or he'd somehow gleaned new insight within the span of a day.

How could that be possible?

Tu'an Qinghe cleared his mind of all distractions. He and Feng Xiao were evenly matched, with the same odds of victory. The victor would therefore be determined through sheer strength.

Both noticed someone approaching on the periphery of their battle, but neither paid the newcomer any mind. It was Yuwen Yihuan, the girl who'd been with Xiao Lü. Instead of pursuing the false Sui emperor alongside Xiao Lü, she'd chosen to remain. Although their speed made it impossible for her to see them clearly, she watched every move they made, rapt.

Xiao Lü had taught Yuwen Yihuan all the martial arts she knew. She was of middling aptitude, but though she could never hope to equal his accomplishments, having an excellent teacher was a great advantage. If she were to wander the jianghu, she might not climb to the top, but she'd still carve out a place among the upper ranks.

She stilled her breathing, minimizing her aura to avoid drawing Feng Xiao's notice. The next time the two men's palms met, Yuwen Yihuan saw her chance—she leapt at Feng Xiao's back, light flashing from her sleeve.

Chapter 186

YUWEN YIHUAN was determined to succeed. The hidden weapon in her sleeve shone with internal energy as it sliced toward the middle of Feng Xiao's back.

She was only three inches from Feng Xiao when Tu'an Qinghe, embroiled in battle with Feng Xiao, suddenly fell back. Feng Xiao spun and floated upward, and the hidden weapon in Yuwen Yihuan's sleeve sliced through empty air. She'd missed.

Her eyes widened in disbelief.

"I won't use underhanded tactics to achieve my victory." Tu'an Qinghe's cold voice echoed in her ears.

She abandoned her attack to evade Feng Xiao's deadly strike. But how could she hope to escape? Sharp pain pierced her back; Yuwen Yihuan's body flew like a kite with its string snapped, crashing heavily to the floor.

She'd activated her true qi in time to protect her life, but her organs were damaged, her strength depleted. She raised her head and coughed up a few mouthfuls of blood, chest heaving as she glared at Feng Xiao and Tu'an Qinghe. Bit by bit, she edged backward.

"Tu'an Qinghe…you betrayed my brother!"

"His alliance is with Kuhezhen, not me." Tu'an Qinghe gazed back at her. His eyes were empty of emotion; he looked at her as one might at a tree or a stone.

Feng Xiao raised his hand for the finishing blow.

"I know what Kuhezhen planted beneath the temple!" Yuwen Yihuan shouted. "If you want to save Cui Buqu, spare my life!"

Feng Xiao froze. Seizing her chance, she sliced open her brow and shoved a black worm into the bloody wound. She turned and leapt unhesitatingly into the pit below, moving so fast even Feng Xiao was a heartbeat behind.

He jumped unthinkingly after her.

"Wait!" Tu'an Qinghe's expression shifted. He hadn't contributed to Kuhezhen's refashioning of the labyrinth, but he was aware of the effort the prince had put into it. Kuhezhen had hoped to lure everyone to their deaths inside; even their souls would be trapped for all eternity. Tu'an Qinghe couldn't bear to watch Feng Xiao go to his death. To him, Feng Xiao was a rare and precious thing: a truly worthy opponent. Enemies could be found anywhere, but an opponent like this should be cherished.

By the time he cried out, Feng Xiao had already disappeared from sight. Tu'an Qinghe's expression flickered through myriad emotions before setting itself in determination. He leapt after him.

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The light of the torch had flashed, then faded, revealing an indistinct scene.

Not far from Cui Buqu and Xiao Lü was a low bronze dais. Atop it, a bronze pillar crawling with intricate carvings stretched toward the ceiling. The torch had flown too fast for them to see much more than that.

They'd had time to register only one additional thing: At the foot of the pillar, thousands of bones piled up like small hills. Long since stripped of their original color, they appeared gray and black, shocking in their sheer quantity.

Daxingshan Temple was a site of Buddhist worship. How could there be so many bones here? No matter how extraordinary Kuhezhen might be, he couldn't possibly create that many corpses in just a few days. The ground they stood upon had been part of the capital for many dynasties. An ossuary of this size was inconceivable —unless the labyrinth was far older than any of them had imagined.

All around the bronze platform, countless cracks snaked across the ground, extending beneath Cui Buqu and Xiao Lü's feet.

"This place must have once been an altar of the ancients," Xiao Lü hazarded. "Maybe it sank due to the ground caving in, or maybe it was originally built underground. Either way, it was lost to time, leaving future generations unaware of its existence. The temple must have been constructed later."

"Or perhaps the first abbot of the temple knew of its existence and built the temple here to suppress evil through compassion," Cui Buqu said. "We can speculate later. We need to figure out how to get out of here."

Xiao Lü smiled wryly. "Don't expect too much from me; I'm not much better off than you. I'll be lucky to make it out on my own, let alone bring you with me."

Cui Buqu coughed. "But you are cleverer than most. That's enough. If I go insane in a moment, remember to return me to my senses."

"All right," said Xiao Lü.

Cui Buqu lit another torch. He pushed down his nausea and dizziness and stared down at the cracks on the ground.

The lines radiated outward in ripple-like patterns. Each ring was perfectly aligned, and none overlapped. The pattern held an allure like shimmering water magnified, drawing the eye to it again and again. As he watched, the cracks began to move like living things. They rose from the ground, the chaotic pattern ordering itself until the many fissures slowly converged into a familiar object. Although Cui Buqu had encountered it only a few times, he knew it well.

The Jade of Heaven Lake.

If there was anything in the world capable of reversing his fate and prolonging his life, it was this legendary jade. But this priceless, one-of-a-kind treasure had already been consumed by Xiao Lü. Could there be a second one?

It wasn't impossible. This labyrinth had a history that far predated Daxingshan Temple. If one of the ancients had hidden a treasure here, perhaps it had remained undiscovered all this time.

The translucent stone shimmered with an inner light, green shading toward blue, like the reflection of the starry sky glinting within a tranquil lake. Its vibrant glow caught and captivated the eye. Even the most resolute man would struggle to resist the allure of such a wonder.

Cui Buqu stared intently at the Jade of Heaven Lake. He closed his eyes, then opened them. His nails bit hard into his palms.

Yet the jade did not disappear. It hovered quietly, just within reach.

Cui Buqu's fingers twitched toward the jade. With this, he wouldn't need to worry about dying. He might even enjoy decades more. Even if his health remained poor, he'd be alive. And as long as he lived, there was hope. He could continue basking in the sun's warmth, plotting against Feng Xiao and gloating over his victories. He could protect more people like his mother—those who were kind and vulnerable—because he was Cui Buqu, hard-hearted and ruthless.

His fingertips were a breath away from the stone.

Alarm rose in his heart, a jangling sense of wrongness. Cui Buqu couldn't say what prompted it—only that it was like an invisible thread tied around his finger, tugging him to a stop for a brief moment.

He bit his tongue, and the sharp tang of blood surged into his mouth, bringing a sudden clarity amid the pain. He realized there was no Jade of Heaven Lake in front of him. His hand hovered before a venomous snake, head reared and staring at him with glowing green eyes. Its tongue flicked in and out as it waited for him to deliver himself to its venomous jaws.

Cui Buqu froze. The snake remained motionless too, as if waiting to see who would falter first. Cui Buqu eased a hand into his lapels.

Lightning-fast, the snake struck; Cui Buqu flung out his hand. The snake hissed and twisted away mid-lunge, wary of the realgar powder Cui Buqu had thrown.

He had made thorough preparations before entering the labyrinth: Both he and Zhangsun were carrying sachets of realgar, effective at warding off most ordinary snakes and insects. Clearly, the sachet was insufficient against a venomous snake over a century old. Exercising the utmost caution, Cui Buqu had tasked Deputy Chief Song Liangchen with finding a secret formula. It included realgar, mugwort, and cinnabar, pure substances full of yang energy that were perfect for countering yin creatures.

The venomous snake slithered off into the darkness and vanished from sight. Peril temporarily averted, Cui Buqu lit the torch again and looked around for Xiao Lü.

Cui Buqu had been caught in danger unawares, yet Xiao Lü hadn't uttered a word of warning. They were sworn nemeses—Xiao Lü would have no issue sitting back and watching him die—but such inaction was exceedingly foolish in their current predicament. And Xiao Lü was no fool.

When Cui Buqu caught sight of him, his face fell. Xiao Lü was a short distance away. At some point, he'd ascended the bronze dais and was now staring at the central pillar. His head was tilted back, his face filled with longing. The winding pattern on the pillar now became clear: What they had taken for intricate carvings were instead countless snakes coiled around the bronze surface. Some reared and flicked their tongues, while others twined around each other as they slithered in circles. Their scales glinted in the torchlight, sending shivers down Cui Buqu's spine.

Yet Xiao Lü seemed completely oblivious as he approached the pillar.

"Xiao Lü!" Cui Buqu rushed forward and felt his foot sink as he trod on a hidden trigger buried in the fissures on the ground. The air instantly filled with the

whistle of arrows. There was nowhere to run or hide, and Cui Buqu's reactions were too slow to evade. The arrows were inches from them as he grabbed Xiao Lü's arm.

The moment he touched him, Xiao Lü shuddered violently and spun, snatching Cui Buqu and leaping into the air. Cui Buqu's feet left the ground just as the arrows shot through the space he'd occupied a heartbeat ago. They whizzed past, grazing his clothes and shoes. One tore the fabric at his shoulder, missing his skin by a whisper.

Xiao Lü released him, and the two collapsed to the ground in an ungainly heap. Xiao Lü's breathing was heavy—it was clear he no longer had the strength to carry Cui Buqu.

A few snakes on the pillar died under the rain of arrows, nailed to the bronze surface. Others, startled, darted in all directions, including toward Cui Buqu and Xiao Lü.

There was no time to speak. They struggled to their feet, stumbling as they dashed away. The torch tumbled to the ground, illuminating the cracks below. Cui Buqu's eyes widened in realization.

"Take me with you, but follow my directions!" he cried.

Xiao Lü didn't hesitate. He seized Cui Buqu's arm, gathered all his energy, and leapt. With a tap of his toes against the stone, he dodged the wave of snakes below.

"Up is qian, down is kun! To the upper left, dui, ten steps!

"Kan, six steps!

"Zhen! Eight steps!"

Xiao Lü was a man of wide and varied knowledge. He understood exactly what Cui Buqu was doing—calling out directions using the eight trigrams of the bagua.

"Qian…no, not north! It's up! Forward and straight up!"

The two leapt into the air and landed in a cave concealed in the stone wall. Xiao Lü was completely drained of strength. He pressed himself against the wall with no thought for any potential poison. His brow was drenched in sweat, his face as pale as a ghost. Cui Buqu wasn't much better off, but at least he hadn't been the one using true qi only moments before. After taking a moment to recover his strength, Xiao Lü whispered, "How did you know there was a cave here?"

"The Yellow River Diagram," Cui Buqu said. "The array was likely modeled after it. Even if death lies everywhere, where death and life meet, there must be a path out. That's the secret."

Closing his eyes, he recalled his vision of the Jade of Heaven Lake. The fissures forming the jade had scattered and rearranged themselves into the shape of this diagram—an ancient cosmological map familiar to anyone who studied geomancy.

"I saw a hint within the illusion earlier. Those fissures look random, but if you took each out separately and rearranged them, they'd form the Yellow River Diagram."

Xiao Lü was silent for a moment, then smiled wryly. "You're better at arrays than I am. It seems Fan Yun held something back when he taught me."

"No," said Cui Buqu. "He treated you the same as he did me. If anything, you had his favor; he taught you more than me, not less. But your heart wasn't in it."

Xiao Lü was extraordinarily intelligent and capable, yet he was also ambitious. And ambitious individuals often shared a common flaw: They set their goals unreasonably high. For them, these arts were mere stepping stones. They felt no need to dedicate themselves to such pursuits, so they paid less attention.

"You're right." Xiao Lü didn't deny it.

"What did you see when you looked at that pillar?"

Xiao Lü paused. "Everything I've ever wanted. Fame, power. An able body. Being born into a prosperous family, climbing the ranks on my own merits, seizing the throne and replacing the emperor of Chen, governing across the Yangtze from your Sui. Then, finally, achieving my goal of unifying the land."

"Your obsession runs too deep," said Cui Buqu coldly. He had no interest in conversing further. When he felt somewhat recovered, he rose to observe his surroundings.

The cave they had landed in was clean but very small, with hardly any room to move around. One side was open and dropped down to the bronze dais. The remaining three sides were solid stone. One in particular was suspiciously smooth, suggesting it was the work of human excavation.

Cui Buqu crouched down, running his fingers along the base of the wall until he found a narrow crack that confirmed his suspicions: This wall wasn't naturally formed. It was a manmade stone door.

Groping blindly, he located the trigger—a stone ball, which he pushed into the corner. With a rumble, the stone door slowly began to rise.

Cui Buqu realized his companion had gone still. "Xiao Lü."

"I fear…I won't be leaving this place," Xiao Lü said calmly.

"If I can," said Cui Buqu, "so can you."

"In this at least, I'm not like you. The poison has seeped into my bones. Even the Jade of Heaven Lake's essence I absorbed is useless."

"What will you do?"

"I cannot escape death. Perhaps it's better if I pass the Jade of Heaven Lake's essence on to you—you still have a glimmer of hope."

"The Xiao Lü I know would never give up until the final moment."

"For me, this is the final moment. Carrying you here exhausted the last of my strength. I can't even stand; my legs are numb." Xiao Lü smiled. "There's just one problem. My body is full of poison. I can't guarantee you won't be poisoned as well if I transfer the essence to you."

Cui Buqu frowned.

"Cui Buqu," said Xiao Lü. "Do you dare take a gamble?"

Chapter 187

WHEN XIAO LÜ WISHED TO, he could give anyone he spoke with the impression that they were bathed in a gentle spring breeze. He felt instantly familiar, like they'd found the other half of their soul. Even Cui Buqu was not immune.

Xiao Lü was an extraordinarily proud man, unable to tolerate the slightest imperfection or flaw. Yet ironically, the first half of his life had been filled with imperfections. He was born into a noble family, but their authority had waned. He was learned and knowledgeable, but found himself serving an incompetent emperor and unable to receive his favor. His gifts were extraordinary: an exceptional memory and martial talent the likes of which appeared once a century. But he was born with poison coursing through his veins, and though he possessed powerful internal cultivation, much of it was consumed suppressing the toxins in his own body.

His original plan had been to infiltrate the Southern dynasty from within. It was his own territory, after all, and the emperor of Chen was weak. The lines of power within the Southern dynasty were tangled and interwoven, and thus easy to exploit. But the appearance of Yuwen Yihuan had altered his view.

At the time, the Northern Zhou dynasty was still thriving. As the daughter of the crown prince, the infant girl was destined to become an emperor's daughter. She'd been left for dead, but she was the twin sister of the crown prince's living child. Her status was both delicate and extremely useful. Xiao Lü covertly gathered his forces and worked for years until he finally created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The three days of the Lantern Festival and the solar eclipse; Zheng Yi and Liu Fang's deaths; the massacre at the Prince of Qin's mansion; the Buddhist ceremony at Daxingshan Temple. The stars aligned: the right time, the right place, and the right people. His victory had seemed assured.

Yet in just a few hours, everything had unraveled.

Had Cui Buqu's group not obstructed him, had his co-conspirator Kuhezhen not betrayed him, had he not pursued perfection and tried to eliminate the emperor of Sui first, perhaps he'd have succeeded in changing the world.

But it was too late for *what ifs*.

Xiao Lü had always understood that the path he walked was as steep as a thousand-foot cliff. No other road was available to him. He'd exhausted himself for years plotting and planning, yet ultimately, he hadn't been able to outrun his own death. The idea of changing one's fate was a joke.

Xiao Lü closed his eyes, seeing his whole life flit by in a blink. A sense of futility washed over him.

"I…won't gamble," said Cui Buqu.

Xiao Lü smiled. "You're afraid."

"Yes, I'm afraid," Cui Buqu said flatly.

He didn't explain, but Xiao Lü saw through him. "Cui Buqu, I thought you understood better than anyone how to seize the moment. You burn all paths of retreat

in your resolve to press forward. Yet right now, cornered as you are, you refuse to take this step. Why?"

His question was met with silence.

Xiao Lü chuckled. "You have attachments. Considerations. You're afraid if you accept my proposal, you'll never leave here. And there's someone you still wish to see, isn't there?"

Cui Buqu acted like he hadn't heard. "Xiao Lü, you often say we're alike. Indeed, our experiences and talents bear a great resemblance; we even both took Fan Yun as our teacher. But I have no desire to overturn the world or usurp the throne, and even less to gamble on a fleeting hope." He added coldly, "If you still have the energy to say all this, get up and look for a way out."

Xiao Lü sighed. "If there is hope, what does it matter if it's fleeting? Escaping this place will tax you beyond what you can bear. Without taking the chance I'm offering, you won't get far."

The situation was indeed dire for Cui Buqu. Although his expression remained placid and his tone moderate, it was only because he was used to suppressing his pain. If not for the stone wall supporting him, he probably wouldn't have been able to sit up at all. Each exhale felt like he was breathing out fire, scorching his heart and lungs, and the cold, damp air of the cavern aggravated his agony. It was as if ice and fire were warring inside him.

Cui Buqu endured and endured, but eventually, he could endure no longer. He spat out a mouthful of blood.

Xiao Lü narrowed his eyes. His sight was fading, but in the torchlight he could vaguely make out the crimson splatter on the ground. He still had enough left in him to tease Cui Buqu. "I didn't expect that after all our time fighting, we'd end up dying together. Perhaps we'll meet again in the next life."

Cui Buqu sneered. "But I don't want to see Pavilion Leader Xiao ever again. Please die a little farther away so I may have peace."

The flame in his hand flickered out, plunging them into darkness once more. Just before the light faded, Cui Buqu saw what lay behind the stone door: a corridor, its stone walls lined with candle holders. This, too, must belong to the labyrinth. If there were holders for candles, someone must have once used this path to cut through the maze. It might just lead them out—provided there were no traps along the way.

He exhaled a breath of stale air. With great effort, he propped himself onto his elbow, then slowly climbed to his feet. Even if Xiao Lü couldn't move, Cui Buqu had to keep going.

"Don't leave; stay here with me…" Xiao Lü called from behind him.

His words were like an invisible shackle, locking around Cui Buqu's ankle and preventing him from taking another step. Cui Buqu was exhausted. His broken body was strained to its limit, yet he'd dragged it along, lingering at death's door, year after year. It took enormous willpower simply to command his body to walk and talk, to force it to keep up with his mind. But it forever lagged behind, heavy and sluggish.

"Cui Buqu, you're trying so hard to leave this place. If the person you want to see doesn't want to see you, what will you do? You've lived a life of agony. You spend your days lost in pain and suffering, and for what? You refuse to pursue the most glorious position for yourself. Why not die here with me? At least then I won't

be lonely in the underworld!”

Behind him, Xiao Lü hunched over, wracked by coughs. He laughed as he coughed and coughed as he laughed. Cui Buqu didn’t look back or respond. He continued to inch forward, step by laborious step. He crossed the threshold of the stone door and entered the passageway. Darkness enveloped him, as if he’d fallen into a bottomless abyss or sunk into the depths of hell. Only the pain in his limbs reminded him he was still alive.

A soft wind blew across the back of his neck. Cui Buqu couldn’t evade as a cold hand gripped his throat.

“You don’t wish to die with me, but I wish to die with you,” Xiao Lü murmured. He tapped Cui Buqu’s acupoint, and his hand slid down from his nape to press firmly against his back. “Cui Buqu, even if you refuse to gamble, I still want to make a wager with you.”

Cui Buqu was unable to speak or move, unable to struggle. Cold, stagnant air washed over him, untouched by the sun for centuries. Yet as Xiao Lü’s hand pressed into his back, it felt as if he’d thrust a fragment of the sun into his body.

His bones were instantly incinerated by that searing light; the clash between ice and fire a relentless torment with no respite. A hook seemed to be stirring and clawing at his flesh, as if trying to tear him apart and rebuild him anew. Scalding waves of heat churned around him yet failed to dissolve the bone-piercing chill. Neither side was willing to relent until the other was consumed, locked in a stalemate with Cui Buqu’s body as the battleground.

How could a mortal body withstand such torture? His was already painfully fragile, unable to weather such an intense shock. The slightest push and it would splinter into thousands of pieces, never to be whole again.

Cui Buqu forced his eyes open a crack and gazed vacantly into the void ahead. His lips parted as if to moan, but no sound escaped.

When the pain reached its peak, his consciousness, his very soul, could no longer bear it. It struggled free of the confines of his body and started to rise toward the heavens. Just a little further and he would be free. Never again would he be shackled by this suffering.

He’d taken revenge for his birth mother, and the Zuoyue Bureau had Zhangsun and Song Liangchen. There was no need for him to regret or worry. The world was full of brilliant men. The court would surely find a new chief to take his place at the Zuoyue Bureau. As for this case—his last—he and Xiao Lü would be buried within the labyrinth forever, their corpses rotting and becoming one with the earth. In a few months, they’d be unrecognizable piles of bones, nameless and forgotten. All grievances and enmities would fade, vanishing like smoke. All obsessions were but illusions.

A voice lingered in his ears, soft and poisonous. *Wouldn’t it be nice to stay here quietly? You’ll have me as your opponent. You won’t be lonely even in the underworld.*

Cui Buqu felt as if he was walking in a daze, pulled along by an unseen guide. He passed under a stone gate and traversed a long corridor where time seemed to stand still. The agonizing sensations of burning heat and freezing ice evaporated, leaving his body weightless. Even the sensation of his feet pressing into the floor as he walked seemed to have faded away.

He couldn’t remember having ever felt so light and carefree—it was a feeling he’d scarcely dared to dream of. Cui Buqu had never imagined there’d come a time when he could feel like an ordinary person. No, he was even more comfortable than an ordinary person. If he kept going like this, it wouldn’t be long before…

Before—

Yet even as that force pulled him inexorably forward, he found himself resisting its tug. Deep down, he felt like there was something he had forgotten—something of great importance.

He looked around in confusion, then lowered his head again. Whatever it was, he couldn’t recall it. The force continued to draw him onward, step by step. A nagging, anxious feeling bubbled up within him. What was it that he couldn’t remember?

Something slipped from his lapels and fell to the ground. Stone struck stone with a crisp ringing sound, jolting his hazy mind back to clarity.

It looked like…a piece of jade.

The recollection came to him sluggishly. One night, after returning to the capital—perhaps it had been during the Lantern Festival—he’d gone to the East Market for an appointment. He’d seen this piece of jade as he passed a shop and bought it on impulse. On the piece of jade was carved…

He furrowed his brow, straining his memory for every detail.

A phoenix.

The phoenix had been vivid and bursting with life, its head proudly raised, ready to soar into the nine heavens. When he looked at it, he felt it bore an uncanny resemblance to someone.

Cui Buqu trembled. He stopped, refusing to take another step no matter how much the force tugged and pulled.

There was something he’d yet to do. There was someone he needed to see. He couldn’t leave.

He didn’t want to die.

He wanted to live.

With that thought, the tide of pain came rushing back in, crashing over him from all directions. It surged and roiled with no end in sight. In his half-conscious stupor, Cui Buqu didn’t notice the blood oozing from the corners of his mouth, nor the uncontrollable way his body shivered and twitched. He didn’t notice that behind him, Xiao Lü was now emaciated and gaunt, frail and gray-haired. His left hand on Cui Buqu’s back was no longer smooth and slender. It was wrinkled and withered, as starkly white as bone.

A mouthful of blood spattered onto Cui Buqu’s shoulder. At last, Xiao Lü loosened his grip and slumped to one side. He didn’t even have the strength to open his eyes and glance at the darkened world around him. He’d once believed he would never accept this. But now, an uncanny tranquility enveloped him, as if all the dust of the mortal world had settled around him. This wasn’t a bad place to die. An underground labyrinth for holding Buddhist sarira—at least it wasn’t filthy and unclean.

It was only a pity he had finally lost to fate.

Xiao Lü's lips curved, pulling at the dried and shriveled skin of his face. The vitality he'd once possessed was gone as if it had never been. Even those who knew him best might not have recognized him. His gaze shifted from the distant, empty void to Cui Buqu before him.

Cui Buqu, I wish you luck. If you don't make it, come keep me company in death. We can duel to our hearts' content in the underworld.

Dazed, Cui Buqu only vaguely heard him. He could no longer tell what was hallucination and what was reality, just as he couldn't tell if his spirit had left his body. He didn't know if he still remained in the mortal realm. A powerful force from the underworld yearned to tear his soul away. His spirit warred fiercely with his body, neither side willing to concede.

He drifted in a strange and boundless darkness, clinging to his last shred of clarity as a shield against the outside forces that would take him. He fought them, inching step by step back down the path he'd come. He didn't know how much time passed before he gradually became aware that he was waking up in his flesh-and-blood body.

The agony had grown more intense. This time it wasn't just his body; his head also ached. He felt as if a hand had reached into the tranquil pond that was his mind and stirred. He let out a soft sigh. The sound traveled down the passageway, bouncing off the walls and echoing over and over.

With great effort, he opened his eyes. All he saw was darkness. Yet he keenly sensed that there was no longer anyone beside him.

"Xiao…Lü?"

There was no response.

Before long, he heard the sound of hurried and erratic footsteps in the distance. This person was unsteady on their feet, stumbling as they ran, at times light and at other times lumbering.

Who could it be?

The emperor of Sui? Zhangsun? Or was it Kuhezhen's human gu? It could also be Feng Xiao or Tu'an Qinghe. Friend or foe, he lacked the strength to move even an inch.

The footsteps drew nearer. The newcomer carried a light, which bounced up and down in time with their steps. A moment later, it resolved into a blurred figure holding a torch.

It was…a girl.

Cui Buqu frowned. In his confusion, he took her for Qiao Xian before remembering he had sent Qiao Xian away. She couldn't possibly be here. It wasn't Qiao Xian, nor was it Qin Miaoyu. Then who?

He soon received his answer.

The girl stopped, panting harshly in the dim light. Her beautiful and delicate features twisted with an incongruous savagery. A vertical gash marred her once lovely forehead, the edges curled outward like a wound inflicted by a knife. Blood trickled down the bridge of her nose, leaving rusty streaks where it dried. Her forehead around the wound seemed to pulse, as if some living thing lurked beneath her skin.

Yuwen Yihuan stared blankly at Cui Buqu, then turned her gaze to the space beside him. Only then did Cui Buqu see Xiao Lü, silent and still.

"Xiao-lang!"

Tears mixed with blood streamed from Yuwen Yihuan's eyes. She fell to her knees and pulled Xiao Lü into her arms, unafraid of his withered and aged corpse.

Why didn't you wait for me? the girl screamed silently. Her eyes shone with a lifetime's worth of sorrow.

To her, Xiao Lü was everything. He was heaven and earth, the entire first half of her life. She'd been born into the imperial family but never spent a single day as a princess. Princess Leping, Yuwen Eying, Yuwen Yun, the emperor of Sui, Empress Dugu. These people were all her closest blood kin, yet they couldn't have been more distant from her. Even when she'd followed Xiao Lü's orders to approach the princess and her daughter, Yuwen Yihuan had never seen them as her true family.

The only one she trusted unreservedly was Xiao Lü.

He'd taught her to read and write, taught her martial arts and strategy. Although they called themselves siblings, had Xiao Lü asked her to strip and offer up her innocence to him, she'd have done it without hesitation.

Unfortunately, Xiao Lü had never asked for such a thing. There was no shortage of beautiful women around him, but all his energy was devoted to his grand plans. He'd probably paid more attention to his opponent, Cui Buqu, than to her. Now his body would never be warm again.

Yuwen Yihuan's tears of blood ran dry.

Slowly, she raised her head and glared at Cui Buqu. He returned her stare with indifference, unafraid.

"Xiao-lang is dead," she said. "So why are you still alive?"

She gently released Xiao Lü, then pulled a long worm from her brow. Her empty hand stretched toward Cui Buqu, trailing down his neck and unfastening his collar with a feather-light touch.

"Look what you did to Xiao-lang. I won't let you die so easily. Your suffering should be greater than his. At least that way he'll have peace in the underworld."

She used her nail to score a gash in the skin beneath Cui Buqu's collarbone, then brought the worm close. It latched on eagerly, sucking at his blood in greedy gulps. She let go, and the worm darted into his flesh, leaving only a small strip of tail exposed. Soon enough, even that disappeared. Yuwen Yihuan tore open Cui Buqu's clothing and watched as the worm wriggled slowly beneath the skin of his chest, unable to suppress a smile.

"Next, I'll remove your heart. But don't worry—with the gu in you, you'll live for a while without it. Perhaps you'll get to feel what it's like to have no heart at all."

Her tone was cool and deliberate as she slowly tugged open Cui Buqu's garments, her expression almost reverent.

Cui Buqu felt like his body had been split into three: a third composed of the familiar pain of his original illness, a third the martial essence Xiao Lü had transferred into his body, and the final third the gu tearing into his flesh. All three fought fiercely for dominance. None were willing to concede. Black blood oozed from Cui Buqu's lips without cease.

His body was at its limit; he could endure no more. But Yuwen Yihuan didn't care how much pain he was in. The greater his pain, the happier she became. If Cui Buqu had been able to speak and describe his current experience to her, she might have clapped in delight. She caressed his chest over his heart, searching for the opportune moment to strike. At last her lips curled in satisfaction.

She sliced open his chest over his sternum, then reached in to rip out his heart.

A sword stabbed soundlessly toward her from behind.

Yuwen Yihuan froze, her heart pounding in alarm. The enemy had followed her down the passageway, but she'd only noticed when they were right at her back. This person was a martial artist on par with Xiao Lü in his prime.

It was her last thought before the sword pierced her through.

Bewilderment filled Yuwen Yihuan's eyes. From the moment she'd plucked the gu from the ground and welcomed it into her own body, she'd accepted her fate. She knew she was a middling martial artist, so she had to rely on the gu to help Xiao Lü. As a vessel for the worm, she would die the most painful of deaths—but it didn't matter how awful her end would be.

Yet her sacrifice had been in vain. By the time she found Xiao Lü, he was already dead.

The bloodstained blade was swiftly withdrawn. A kick sent Yuwen Yihuan flying, and the blade drew a swift arc through the air. Crimson blood splattered the stone walls as her head parted from her body and rolled into the darkness.

Cui Buqu felt an arm wrap tightly around his waist.

Distantly, he heard someone calling his name over and over, their voice laced with fear and urgency. He opened his eyes a crack and tried to speak, but only brought up a mouthful of blood.

Above him, Feng Xiao's face came into focus. It was entirely changed.

Had the arrogant Deputy Chief Feng ever made this kind of expression before? Cui Buqu felt an urge to laugh. He managed to say, "Help me remove the gu…"

Feng Xiao's gaze was fixed on the pulsing movements beneath the skin of Cui Buqu's chest. He gritted his teeth. "I dare not."

He didn't dare. Cui Buqu wanted to laugh even more. "The two options are… life and death. That's all." He closed his eyes and said calmly, "I entrust my life to you. I'll hold no grudges if I die."

Feng Xiao's expression shifted, as if he was biting back something he wished to say. He lit a torch and drew a dagger from his sleeve. He held the tip in the flame, then pressed it to Cui Buqu's chest. Still he hesitated to make the cut.

"Hurry…" Cui Buqu's body twitched as the gu burrowed deeper. He felt his awareness slipping.

Feng Xiao dared not wait any longer. He trained his eyes on an undulating patch of skin and struck. A black dot wriggled within the streaming blood, trying to conceal itself. Feng Xiao grasped it firmly and pulled it out.

"Ah…" Cui Buqu's eyes snapped open at the burst of pain. His gaze was unfocused, his face ashen and drenched in sweat.

Moving with extraordinary speed, Feng Xiao flung the worm into the torch's fire. Then he gathered Cui Buqu into his arms and dashed away, leaving Yuwen Yihuan's corpse behind.

Cui Buqu was hazily aware that Feng Xiao was carrying him while sprinting. The arms around him were steady, trying to minimize any jostling. The Feng-er he'd met a year ago in Liugong City would certainly not have shown him this much consideration. Cui Buqu was rather touched.

Feeling Cui Buqu shift slightly, Feng Xiao seemed to think the poison was flaring up again. He screeched to a halt and lowered his head. "What's wrong?" he asked, anxious.

"Nothing." As long as Cui Buqu could endure the pain, he'd dismiss it.

Feng Xiao smoothly set him down.

"How did you find me?" Cui Buqu asked.

"I tracked Yuwen Yihuan. That girl would have become an enormous problem if not eliminated. I didn't expect to find you with her."

He and Tu'an Qinghe had both ended up in the labyrinth, Feng Xiao chasing Yuwen Yihuan and Tu'an Qinghe chasing Feng Xiao. They'd fought again, but the collapse of the labyrinth had separated them. Feng Xiao had wandered around the altars and nearly perished several times. Fortunately, his incredible martial arts allowed him to overcome each and every crisis.

At the same time, Zhangsun had been fleeing the human gu with the emperor in tow when they ran into Tu'an Qinghe. The human gu had no power to differentiate between friend and foe; it didn't spare Tu'an Qinghe simply because he was on Kuhezhen's side. After the monster's terrifying pursuit, the appearance of Tu'an Qinghe had given Zhangsun the chance to slip away.

"I met them just up ahead. Zhangsun found an exit, so I had him take the emperor out first while I came to look for you. Instead, I found Yuwen Yihuan."

Feng Xiao spoke quickly as he described what had happened. He glossed over all the dangers. He knew if he mentioned them, Cui Buqu would ask more questions —and if Cui Buqu asked, he had to answer. But he didn't want to waste any time.

Cui Buqu had seen many sides of Feng Xiao, but he'd never seen him so panicked and flustered. "So Tu'an Qinghe is still here, and alive."

"Hopefully the human gu catches up to him and they destroy each other. Best if he never appears before me again."

Cui Buqu gave a small smile. "I fear your wish won't come true."

A man had appeared at the entrance of the passage.

The lantern in his hand swayed as he steadily made his way closer. If Tu'an Qinghe could perish at the hands of a human gu, he wouldn't have deserved his reputation.

Feng Xiao sighed. "So persistent!"

But he didn't rush to confront their new adversary. Instead, he pulled out a jade pendant and held it in front of Cui Buqu. "You dropped this."

Cui Buqu glanced at the phoenix carved into the jade. He shook his head. "It's not mine."

“Then whose is it?”

“Perhaps it was Yuwen Yihuan’s,” said Cui Buqu flatly.

Feng Xiao was so angry he laughed. “Would it kill you to speak the truth just once?”

“Well,” said Cui Buqu, “maybe. I really am about to die.”

Feng Xiao froze. Cui Buqu took the opportunity to change the subject. “However, if you defeat Tu’an Qinghe, perhaps I’ll tell you the truth you wish to hear.”

“In that case, you had better still be alive to talk to me when I return.”

“I’ll do my best,” Cui Buqu said sincerely.

Feng Xiao lowered his head to kiss him, and this time Cui Buqu didn’t resist. Perhaps he’d exhausted all his energy. He simply leaned against the stone wall for support and raised his chin, letting Feng Xiao take as he pleased.

After a moment, they parted. Feng Xiao tucked away the jade pendant and strode toward Tu’an Qinghe. Cui Buqu watched him go, then slowly closed his eyes.

Tu’an Qinghe hadn’t moved. He bent and set the lantern on the floor. “If possible, I wish our battle to take place above ground.”

Feng Xiao rolled his eyes. “You think *I* want to fight you down here?”

Tu’an Qinghe gave him a serious nod. “Since this battle is unavoidable, let victory depend on our skills.”

Feng Xiao snorted. Then he dashed toward Tu’an Qinghe, swift as lightning.

In an instant, their figures intertwined. One wielded a saber, the other zither strings. Tu’an Qinghe’s dazzling saber glare rolled out and engulfed his opponent. Feng Xiao’s sleeves billowed. He looked vulnerable, even frail, surrounded by the saber qi’s tremendous might, as if he might collapse at any moment.

But then the strings shot out from his sleeves and shattered the saber qi. Tu’an Qinghe changed tactics; he leapt into the air and swung his sword again, and his saber glare descended like roiling thunderclouds.

Feng Xiao unsheathed the whip sword at his waist. With a flick of his wrist, he infused the thin, flexible blade with true qi. It turned cold and hard, swathed in a chilling aura.

The saber glare closed in, relentless as a fierce tiger leaping down from the mountain to catch its prey. Its qi swelled like thunderclouds low on the horizon, rolling in to crush all of heaven and earth.

Even Cui Buqu could feel the dense sweep of bloodlust from where he was sitting. Endless and indefatigable, it sent a chill shivering through him. He’d never witnessed the splendid martial arts of Hulugu before he died, but he’d heard Fan Yun speak of them. Fan Yun had even demonstrated a couple of moves for him. While the imitation couldn’t hold a candle to the original, it had been enough for Cui Buqu to glimpse the deadly and overwhelming power of the foremost master of his day.

Tu’an Qinghe, who’d never set foot in the Central Plains, displayed a martial style inspired by Hulugu’s, yet also distinctly his own. He’d spent years training in the snowy mountains of his homeland. All he thought of and cared about was martial arts, and this unadulterated devotion to his craft lent his skills an incredible purity.

Though he lacked Hulugu's crushing power, his moves had an almost transcendental quality. Given enough time, he was certain to surpass Hulugu and become a grandmaster of his generation.

But that was a tale for the far future. Today, the opponent in front of him was in no way his inferior. Though Feng Xiao rarely set foot in the jianghu, he too was a gifted genius. Only recently, he'd survived qi deviation and taken his martial arts to new heights. Yet this pulse-pounding, tumultuous battle had no witness other than Cui Buqu. It was a pity, in a way.

Even Feng Xiao wasn't sure he could prevail. He and Tu'an Qinghe were almost equal in strength; they had the same odds of winning. Any tiny, imperceptible mistake would mean defeat. But he couldn't afford to lose.

Because there was someone behind him.

The tidal wave of saber glares crashed over Feng Xiao, who stood unmoving. He didn't rush to dodge or counter—he didn't yet know his opponent's whereabouts. A sea of saber glares engulfed his vision, most of them mere afterimages. But the real saber glares were hidden within the fakes, and if he failed to distinguish them, he might find the next slash scored into his flesh.

Feng Xiao leapt into the air.

He swung his sword, and his blade and body became one. Together, he and the sword pierced through the saber glares.

The passageway exploded with light. Two figures parted in midair and landed on protruding rocks in the cliff face. A long gash stretched from Tu'an Qinghe's right shoulder to the left side of his abdomen, weeping blood. Feng Xiao's arm was a mess of cuts beneath a crimson-soaked sleeve.

Both their faces had paled. They were both suffering from more than trivial injuries. If they continued, they would continue to wound each other like this until they both died together. It was the only possible conclusion.

Feng Xiao didn't want to die here. He still had to bring Cui Buqu out of the labyrinth. But he didn't say so out loud. Instead he said, "Your heart is elsewhere. It's not in this battle."

Tu'an Qinghe's eyes widened. It seemed Feng Xiao had hit the mark.

"Why don't we postpone this fight to another day?"

His opponent seemed to consider this. "When?"

"Three years from today. In three years, I'll meet you at Jin Peak on Mount Emei."

Tu'an Qinghe turned and left—his only answer. In the blink of an eye, he'd vanished into the darkness. It had been obvious something was worrying him; even now, he was in a desperate hurry. He hadn't even bothered to staunch his bleeding.

Feng Xiao slanted a glance at the spot where Tu'an Qinghe had been standing earlier. Yuwen Yihuan's corpse still lay sprawled on the ground nearby, and in an instant, Feng Xiao understood.

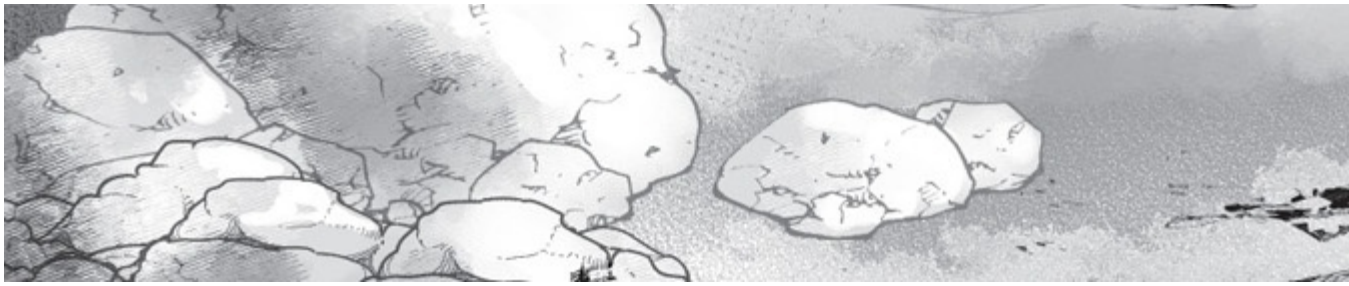
But he had no time to consider it. He strode quickly over to Cui Buqu, then bent down, helping him up as gently as possible. He couldn't resist brushing a hand over Cui Buqu's chest. When he felt a faint flutter of warmth there, he unconsciously relaxed. "I'll carry you out, all right?" he whispered.

Cui Buqu twitched. He glanced at Feng Xiao before closing his eyes once more and nodding.

Feng Xiao pulled Cui Buqu onto his back. He started to walk, pausing after each step. His progress was slow but very steady. “Promise me you’ll still be awake when we leave the labyrinth.”

A moment passed—or perhaps it was many moments. Finally, Feng Xiao heard a faint sigh from behind him. “I promise.”

Cui Buqu didn’t make promises easily, and when he did, he always kept them. But Feng Xiao felt no relief. Instead, he grew even more tense. No one understood Cui Buqu’s desire to survive better than Feng Xiao. Yet there was also no one who better understood the extent of his injuries.



Even if Cui Buqu wanted to live, how could his body possibly weather such severe harm? Feng Xiao could seek out the best physicians in the world, but Cui Buqu first had to make it out of the labyrinth.

"If you keep your promise," Feng Xiao said, "I'll tell you something."

"…Mm?"

"Cui Buqu, I like you. If you live, I'll deign to stay by your side for a lifetime. If you die, even if the Zuoyue Bureau buries you, I will dig up your grave and scatter your bones. I will ensure your soul cannot rest and will never reincarnate."

Feng Xiao's voice was icy—cold enough to freeze a person solid. Yet Cui Buqu smiled.

Whether it was the martial power Xiao Lü had transferred, the essence of the Jade of Heaven Lake, or the two poisons neutralizing each other within his body, he'd already persevered through the greatest agony. The pain was no longer so unbearable.

But he had no intention of telling Feng Xiao just yet.

He'd been given the chance to admire Deputy Chief Feng's confession and submission, so of course he would take it. At most, once they escaped from here, he'd forgo setting a trap for him just this once. That was good enough.

END OF MAIN STORY

Epilogue 1

IT WAS DESTINED to be a long night in the capital. Wind and rain darkened the sky, and countless people tossed and turned in their beds, unable to sleep. From time to time they glanced out the windows, anxiously awaiting the arrival of dawn.

The interior of the palace was brightly lit. Candle after candle lined the floors of its pavilions, until the buildings were almost as bright as the sky itself. The attendants serving through the night rushed in and out of the palace, their faces grave.

Not far from the palace, in the heart of the city, the interior of Daxingshan Temple was in chaos. With Zhangsun's support, the emperor of Sui climbed out of a dry well on the temple grounds, covered in dirt and dust.

It had never occurred to anyone that the well behind the temple, hidden among the trees, was yet another entrance to the underground labyrinth. The well had been dry for as long as the monks could remember, and it had been sealed with a heavy stone years ago to ensure no one fell in by accident. Without Zhangsun Bodhi's assistance, the emperor could never have clambered up to call for help. Even if he had, it was doubtful anyone would have heard him in the confusion. Had Xiao Lü been there, even he would have lamented that the emperor of Sui shouldn't suffer such an ignominious end as death at the bottom of a well.

Unfortunately, despite possessing talent great enough to shake the world, and despite the charisma that'd drawn so many experts to his shadow court, Xiao Lü had met his own end in the dark.

With Xiao Lü and Yuwen Yihuan dead, the remainder of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai's forces collapsed like a house of cards. Yuxiu had died back on Mount Tiannan, and Fan Yun's loyalties lay elsewhere. As for Yuan Sansi, he'd narrowly escaped—but even if he'd managed to keep his life, he'd find it difficult to make further trouble.

The dust had settled, though many had paid far too steep a price.

Daxingshan Temple was in a state of complete disorder. Kuhe-zhen had laced the ginger soup with gu, causing the officials and imperial guards to turn on each other in a vicious battle. By the time the empress arrived with reinforcements, there were already numerous casualties.

The emperor of Sui was still blinking in the lanternlight when he saw the empress rushing toward him.

"Your Majesty!" she cried.

The emperor was momentarily stunned, then threw all courtesy to the wind and rushed toward her as well. He embraced her tightly, tears in his eyes. The two had been inseparable since they'd come of age, then spent years under the suspicion of Yuwen Yong and his son. Yang Jian had woken up every day on pins and needles, fearful for his family's safety. If not for Empress Dugu's strength and support, uplifting him in his moments of weakness and solidifying his resolve, there might be no emperor of Sui today.

After escaping the horrors of the labyrinth, the sight of his beloved wife felt like something from a dream. His eyes went red at the rims, and he yearned to tell her

everything about his terrifying experiences underground. But even now he remembered his position and responsibilities. He swallowed his words and started with the practicalities. “Why has the empress come? Where are the others?”

This second question was addressed to Yu Qingze, who was hurrying over. Empress Dugu gestured for the general to speak first.

“Your Majesty, please don’t worry,” Yu Qingze replied. “The situation is under control. I, along with Qin-niangzi from the Jiejian Bureau, used medicinal herbs such as mugwort and calamus to expel the impurities. The poison has been largely eliminated. However, according to the imperial physicians, some will require further treatment. The casualties are still being tallied. I ask that Your Majesty return to the palace for your own safety.”

The emperor nodded. He saw the empress preparing to speak and, raising a hand to stop her, turned to Zhangsun Bodhi, whose anxiety was palpable. “Is Cui-xiansheng still below? You should go find him. Yu Qingze can send men to accompany you.”

Zhangsun Bodhi accepted without demur. He cupped his hands to the emperor in thanks and promptly disappeared back down the well with Yu Qingze and his men to begin his search.

The emperor turned to the empress, naked joy shining on his face. “It seems the empress is feeling better?”

Empress Dugu sighed. “I wasn’t ill, Your Majesty. I was poisoned.”

The emperor was taken aback. “Poison? When were you poisoned?”

“Lihua came to the palace and confessed everything. You remember that Eying was originally a twin? The other child was weak and mistaken for dead when she was born. She was taken out of the palace for burial but miraculously survived. The leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai took her in as his sworn sister and gave her the name Yuwen Yihuan. When she was grown, she secretly returned to find her family. Lihua was moved by compassion at seeing her lost daughter, and her mistake led to all the trouble now.”

Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao had deduced all this by now, but it was the first time the emperor was hearing it. His brows shot up in shock.

“During Yuwen Eying’s recent birthday banquet, I couldn’t bear to refuse Lihua’s requests for me to visit the princess’s residence,” Empress Dugu continued. “Surely Your Majesty recalls.”

The emperor nodded, and she pressed on. “I only learned much later that when I returned to the palace with my maids, one of them had been replaced with Yuwen Yihuan’s. She had no other way to infiltrate the palace, so she tricked me into bringing her servant in myself. She took the chance to poison my meals, and as the days passed, I fell ill. Thank heavens Lihua saw sense and came to me before it was too late. She revealed everything and gave me an antidote she stole from Yuwen Yihuan.”

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As the emperor was hearing these shocking revelations, Ming Yue was bringing men to surround Kuhezhen’s residence.

The manor was a gift from the emperor, its size and design befitting an imperial prince. Yet the large complex was deathly silent, its residents seemingly oblivious to the troops at the gates. It was impossible to believe that everyone inside—Kuhezhen included—could manage to sleep at a time like this. Ming Yue raised his hand. The troops at his back charged, ramming the gates and rushing in. Ming Yue followed closely after.

Yet once inside, everyone stopped in their tracks, shock scrawled over their faces.

The courtyard before the main hall was strewn with bodies. All the staff sent by the emperor and Kuhezhen's own followers—Han and Göktürk alike—lay on the ground. Some had collapsed with their eyes wide open, their faces frozen in expressions of terror, as if they'd died of fright.

Ming Yue was first to react: He shook off his stupor and rushed into the hall.

It was empty.

The side hall, main courtyard, main house. They were all empty.

Had Kuhezhen realized the game was up and abandoned his people to flee? Ming Yue clung to a last thread of hope as he went from room to room, until he finally flung open the door of the woodshed.

Here at last he found the person he sought—if he could be called a person anymore. Kuhezhen was sprawled on his back amid the firewood, his body covered in blood. His arms, legs, and face were riddled with holes, like rotten wood insects had drilled through. If not for his clothes and stature, he would have been unidentifiable. Ming Yue's scalp went numb with terror, and he dared not take another step forward. The seventh prince of the Göktürks, Kuhezhen, raiser of gu, had succumbed to his own poison's backlash and met his horrific end.

A chill swept down Ming Yue's back. Though he sensed no murderous intent, his instincts kicked in; he sidestepped and turned to face his opponent.

Silhouetted in the doorway of the shed was Tu'an Qinghe, who should have been at Daxingshan Temple intercepting Feng Xiao and the others. Ming Yue's heart went cold. If it came to one-on-one combat, he was no match for this man.

Epilogue 2

BUT TU'AN QINGHE made no move to attack.

He took two steps inside; Ming Yue unthinkingly made way to let him enter. Tu'an Qinghe walked straight over to Kuhezhen's corpse and crouched down. Disregarding the gu swarming over the corpse, he reached out to touch Kuhezhen's face.

Ming Yue almost yelled at him to stop—yet as he watched, he found himself stunned into silence. The gu didn't leap toward Tu'an Qinghe as expected; instead, they wriggled away, evading him like he was a scorpion. Tu'an Qinghe showed none of the expected shock, nor did he direct his anger at Ming Yue. He merely brushed his hand over Kuhezhen's eyelids.

The seventh prince's most celebrated feature had always been his deep blue eyes. Upon his arrival in the Sui capital, his handsome face and beautiful eyes had drawn much attention. The people of the Central Plains looked down on him in public for his Göktürk lineage, yet this didn't stop them from admiring him in private.

Now his eyes and face were an unrecognizable horror.

But when Ming Yue saw Tu'an Qinghe bend to pick Kuhezhen up, he couldn't stop himself from crying out, "No!"

Tu'an Qinghe looked at him calmly, murder glinting in his gaze. Ming Yue was a top-tier martial artist; he didn't fear death, and he wasn't afraid of fighting Tu'an Qinghe. But Tu'an Qinghe's bloodlust was so palpable he was shaken.

"He's covered in those gu worms," he tried to explain. "Maybe they won't harm *you*, but if you take him out of here, the gu will go everywhere. Innocent people will be harmed!" He paused. "You may be a Göktürk, but all martial artists strive to free their hearts from attachments. Surely you don't wish to stain your hands with such a terrible deed."

Tu'an Qinghe stared silently at Kuhezhen's corpse. For a long time, he said nothing.

Kuhezhen had always been particular about cleanliness.

The Göktürks were nomadic. Even their nobles found it difficult to be as stringent in this regard as their Central Plains counterparts. But perhaps due to his mixed heritage, Kuhezhen was different. He'd been sensitive about it since childhood—whenever his brothers threw mud at him and stained his clothes, he'd silently cry for hours.

On one occasion, Kuhezhen had hidden himself in a secluded cave to sob. Tu'an Qinghe, who had happened to be training there, became irate at the child for interrupting him—this was their first meeting.

As they grew older, Kuhezhen had established himself in the upper echelons of Göktürk society and was apprenticed under the tribe's shaman. He'd learned to bury his emotions, but with his longtime friend Tu'an Qinghe, he showed something of his old self. Tu'an Qinghe didn't approve of Kuhezhen's unscrupulous methods, but the prince had chosen his path, and there was no turning back. Kuhezhen had taken that road to its dark end.

So be it.

Given Kuhezhen's love of cleanliness, he'd surely have hated the idea of being consumed by filthy worms after his death. Tu'an Qinghe went to grab more firewood from a corner in the kitchen and piled it around Kuhezhen's body.

Ming Yue was momentarily taken aback at how cooperative Tu'an Qinghe was being. He rushed to help. A makeshift pyre swiftly took shape. Without further ado, Tu'an Qinghe lit a torch and tossed it onto the wood pile. The flames sparked and sputtered, spreading rapidly as the fire roared to life. Soon, not only the shed but the entire kitchen was engulfed.

The two men retreated outside to watch.

Ming Yue cupped his hands in gratitude. "Thank you for your understanding, Tu'an Qinghe-xiansheng."

"I didn't do it for you."

"I know," said Ming Yue. "It doesn't matter what your reasons are. As long as the outcome benefits the common people, it's still a meritorious deed. So thank you." He performed a deep bow.

"Go get a box," Tu'an Qinghe said.

Ming Yue started, but quickly realized what Tu'an Qinghe intended. He went into the house and found a clean box of appropriate size, then lined it with velvet.

By the time the fire burned down to embers, it was approaching noon. The charred, black walls of the kitchen emitted an unpleasant odor. Both Ming Yue and Tu'an Qinghe had been standing there since dawn.

Tu'an Qinghe entered the smoldering woodshed, where he picked up the charred remains, piece by piece, and placed them in the box.

Ming Yue didn't offer to help; he sensed Tu'an Qinghe wouldn't appreciate his intervention. Once all the bones were collected, Tu'an Qinghe turned and left with the box.

As the Imperial Guards stepped forward to stop him, Ming Yue raised a hand. Even if they all attacked Tu'an Qinghe together, they had no chance of victory. Box in hand, Tu'an Qinghe departed the seventh prince's residence, disappearing with a few swift leaps into the vast blue sky.

Barring any further upheaval, he would return to the Khaganate to lay his old friend to rest.

Ming Yue breathed a sigh of relief. He knew nothing of Tu'an Qinghe's pact with Feng Xiao, but even if he had, he wouldn't have tried to stop him. The city had just begun to settle. If they had to fight a formidable adversary like Tu'an Qinghe now, peace would come at an even steeper price.

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Zhangsun, Yu Qingze, and their men descended into the dry well.

Not far from their starting point, they came across a fork in the passageway. Zhangsun pointed them down the side he'd yet to explore—if Cui Buqu was down the other, Zhangsun would have run into him on his way out.

This second passageway was deeper and narrower. Echoes rebounded off the walls and funneled into their ears. Zhangsun and Yu Qingze were unaffected, but the soldiers behind them grew anxious. Though they stepped as lightly as possible, they could hear a constant, rustling echo, as if some creature was creeping after them.

At the end of the passage, a magnificent bronze dais rose up before them.

Everyone gazed at the dais in awe. They had no idea the traps had already been triggered by Cui Buqu and Xiao Lü—if not, Zhangsun Bodhi would probably have been the only one to emerge alive.

Zhangsun was first to spot the cave above the platform. He leapt up and stumbled upon the bodies of Xiao Lü and Yuwen Yihuan. If they were dead here, there was a chance Cui Buqu had escaped. Zhangsun didn't stop to think. He instructed Yu Qingze to lead the others out the way they'd come, then dashed back through the cave.

Halfway down the passage, a blast of wind gusted toward him. He countered reflexively, only to discover that his opponent's internal cultivation far surpassed his own. Their palms met, and Zhangsun staggered back, blood roiling in his chest.

"You?" His opponent withdrew his hand. Feng Xiao's face came into view.

His freshly bald head was conspicuous in the lanternlight, but even more striking was his disheveled appearance. The normally fastidious Deputy Chief Feng was covered in dust. Though it didn't obscure his handsome features, the novelty of the sight shocked Zhangsun Bodhi speechless.

As Feng Xiao shifted, Cui Buqu came into view on his back.

"Lord Chief!"

Cui Buqu slumped wearily against Feng Xiao's shoulder. His eyes were tightly shut; it was impossible to tell whether he was dead or alive. Zhangsun's heart thudded. He stepped forward to take Cui Buqu, but Feng Xiao held up a hand.

"He's fine." Feng Xiao's voice was hoarse; he'd been down in the stale air of the labyrinth too long. "I examined him earlier. His breathing is weak but stable. Let's bring him out before anything else."

Zhangsun pursed his lips. "Thank you, Deputy Chief Feng. Allow me to carry him."

"No need." Feng Xiao raised his chin. "Lead the way."

Zhangsun nodded and said no more. He turned and led them back the way he'd come. The journey was almost bizarrely uneventful, and the three of them quickly exited the sunless labyrinth.

When the first rays of light hit him, Feng Xiao thought the sun had never felt so good before. Even better was this: He and Cui Buqu were both alive.

Now that they were out, Zhangsun thought he could finally retrieve his superior. He silently held out his arms. But instead of handing Cui Buqu over, Feng Xiao said, "I'll take him back to the Jiejian Bureau and have a doctor look him over there."

This time, Zhangsun Bodhi objected. "Thank you for your kindness, Deputy Chief Feng, but the empress has sent an imperial physician to the Zuoyue Bureau. He's waiting to treat the lord chief now."

Feng Xiao didn't wait to be invited. "Then let's get back to the Zuoyue Bureau." Before Zhangsun could respond, Feng Xiao had ordered someone to bring him a horse. He helped Cui Buqu into the saddle first, then mounted behind him and swiftly galloped off.

Zhangsun Bodhi was left speechless.

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Though Xiao Lü had given Cui Buqu the Jade of Heaven Lake's essence, it'd entered his body along with Xiao Lü's old poison. Fighting poison with poison wasn't recommended; physicians considered it a treatment of last resort. But for someone like Cui Buqu, ravaged by chronic illness, the pain was hardly worth mentioning.

Cui Buqu remained unconscious for a full three days and nights. At times his breathing grew shallow, and his pulse weakened. It was only thanks to everyone's vigilant observation and timely infusions of true qi that he passed safely through the danger.

On the third day, he finally opened his eyes.

Upon seeing the bald head by his bedside, he first thought he was still at Daxingshan Temple. But he quickly recognized Feng Xiao.

It seemed a beauty would always be a beauty, regardless of hairstyle—or lack thereof. After staring at Feng Xiao's bare head for a while, Cui Buqu found it had an ascetic elegance. It helped that Deputy Chief Feng seemed to have thrown himself wholeheartedly into the act: He was dressed in a plain white monk's robe, which enhanced his aura of ethereal untouchability.

Of course, that was only if he kept his mouth shut.

But this was asking the impossible. The moment Cui Buqu shifted, Feng Xiao's eyes, which had been trained on the flowers outside the window, fixed upon his face.

"How long did I sleep?" Cui Buqu asked, his voice so hoarse as to be almost unrecognizable.

Feng Xiao pursed his lips and suppressed a sigh of relief. He quietly poured a cup of warm water, then supported Cui Buqu so he could drink.

Even the imperial physician had been helpless to alleviate Cui Buqu's suffering. There was no medicine he could prescribe. All anyone could do was take turns combating the poison with true qi when it flared up. Yet the treatment they'd devised had worked. That Cui Buqu had awakened at all was a great fortune among a sea of misfortunes. After surviving this tribulation, he still might not live to a ripe old age, but he'd no longer be on the verge of death.

"Three days," Feng Xiao said at last.

Cui Buqu felt as if half a lifetime had passed, yet it had been only three days.

How fortunate.

"Now that you've seen me," Feng Xiao said deliberately, "don't you have something to say?"

Cui Buqu looked at him in confusion, as if he had no earthly idea what he was talking about.

Feng Xiao was instantly suspicious. Cui Buqu possessed an eidetic memory; he couldn't possibly have forgotten. At the same time, he'd been on death's door during that conversation. Perhaps he'd taken it for a dream or hallucination, to be forgotten on waking.

"In the cave, while I was carrying you. The things we talked about." Deputy Chief Feng was as arrogant as an immortal in the clouds looking down on the people below. His tone carried a hint of magnanimous bafflement. "Could Chief Cui have truly forgotten every word?"

Cui Buqu pretended to be intently trying to recall what had happened. "I remember…you said I wasn't allowed to die."

"And then?" Feng Xiao asked coolly.

"That's all," Cui Buqu said innocently.

Feng Xiao sneered. "Good, wonderful, excellent!" Each word was heavy with sarcasm. "Cui Buqu," he said savagely. "Let me say this: I'll never look at you again for as long as you live, even if you beg!"

Then he saw Cui Buqu smile.

Feng Xiao had never seen Cui Buqu smile like that before: serene and genuine, without any hint of mockery. It was the joy of someone who'd struggled through innumerable tribulations, traversing fire and ice to be greeted, at last, with paradise.

"To live and see you again is a wonderful thing," Cui Buqu said.

Feng Xiao's heart instantly softened.

Epilogue 3

THE FOURTH YEAR OF THE KAIHUANG ERA began as a tumultuous one. Before even the first month had passed, the capital was rocked by a series of strange events.

The Prince of Qin's banquet on the night of the Lantern Festival followed by the uproar at Daxingshan Temple were enough to leave people reeling. In the days that followed, the news that the seventh prince's residence had been confiscated for investigation and that Princess Leping had been reprimanded and ordered to reflect in solitude barely raised a ripple.

But despite the year's explosive beginnings, the city ultimately settled back into peace. Arrangements were made for the casualties, and Daxingshan Temple was temporarily closed for repairs. The empress's health had greatly improved. The crown prince and the Prince of Jin were well on their way to recovery, and Cui Buqu had woken from his coma and grew stronger every day. Soon, he'd be able to walk and enjoy the sun in the courtyard.

Everything was going well. The only flaw in all this loveliness was the matter of Deputy Chief Feng's hair.

There were thousands of beauties in the world, of all different types—yet even among those, Deputy Chief Feng stood out. Perhaps "beauty" was too effeminate a word. Feng Xiao's appearance wasn't effeminate in the least; he was stunningly handsome. Yet when one's handsomeness reached an extreme, it, too, became a kind of beauty.

A true beauty would remain beautiful regardless of how they wore their hair. It didn't matter if they were bald, or had long hair, or even if their hair was as stringy as weeds. At first, this was Feng-er's attitude as well. He donned Buddhist robes and played at being a monk. Those who didn't know him mistook him for a young devotee who'd left his temple to wander the world.

But as spring yielded to summer, he realized that having no hair was rather inconvenient. Firstly, his head was always cold, a sensation he found generally unpleasant. Secondly, hair was ugliest not when it was absent, nor when it was long, but during the in-between stage when it was just starting to grow out. Neither long nor short, the stubble pricked Feng Xiao every time he touched his head out of habit.

When he looked in the mirror, Feng Xiao found himself gripped by a rare moment of self-doubt.

Recently, Cui Buqu had grown somewhat aloof toward Feng Xiao. Likewise, the Zuoyue Bureau seemed distant when they dealt with the Jiejian Bureau: businesslike and lukewarm. Feng Xiao knew Cui Buqu was fond of his face, even if he never said so. This fondness rarely showed itself openly, but Feng Xiao was certain of it. A person's eyes never lied.

After all, who didn't love beauty? Even enlightened monks might not escape its hold. Feng-er didn't waste his time wondering whether Cui Buqu loved him for his face or his mind, because it was a stupid question. Both his face and mind were part of him. Feng Xiao firmly believed that even if someone with his exact same face showed up, Cui Buqu's heart wouldn't be swayed. Any such person would lack Feng Xiao's unrivaled soul. Only by combining the two would you get the peerless, one-of-

a-kind man known as Feng Xiao.

Yet this made Cui Buqu's recent aloofness all the more perplexing.

Feng Xiao felt that personally interrogating Cui Buqu would make him appear overly concerned, so he arranged for Qin Miaoyu to deliver holiday gifts as an excuse to drop by.

When Feng Xiao had first brought Qin Miaoyu on as his subordinate, Feng Xiao had only valued her skill with fragrances. He'd never anticipated she would so accurately live up to her name—*clever speech*. Qin Miaoyu was quick-witted and astute. The only people in the Jiejian Bureau who knew about him and Cui Buqu were her and Ming Yue, but Ming Yue was a simple and honest man, plainspoken to a fault. Feng Xiao had little hope for him. Qin Miaoyu, on the contrary, was adept at observing others and provided a fair amount of assistance.

Feng Xiao knew she wished to remain in the capital, so he went with the flow and let her stay. Besides, she'd made great contributions during the Lantern Festival incidents.

This time, however, even Qin Miaoyu returned defeated. Her expression was a little odd as she gazed at Feng Xiao. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again.

"Spit it out!" said Feng Xiao, irritated.

"I didn't see Chief Cui," said Qin Miaoyu. "It seems the Zuoyue Bureau has taken a new case from the Ministry of Justice. His esteemed self wasn't free to meet with me."

Feng Xiao's expression screamed *you're completely useless*.

Indignant, Qin Miaoyu continued. "But I *did* hear some news your lordship may want to know, which is why I came back. Chief Cui visited the palace two days ago. Empress Dugu wishes to arrange a marriage between you and Princess Lanling and asked him to ascertain your opinion."

Throughout history, marrying into the royal family had been the greatest of honors. For ministers, it was an enormous boost to their own status and authority, not to mention elevating that of their future descendants. But both the emperor and empress knew that these boons were likely of little use to Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu. Neither was the type to bow down to power and wealth. Forcing a marriage upon them might end up driving them away instead.

Empress Dugu admired Feng Xiao, but admiring him from afar and wanting him as her son-in-law were two different things. She was a sensible person with a good read on Feng Xiao's character; she knew he was unlikely to submit to a conferral of marriage. Forcing him would only put the princess's happiness at risk. Yet she couldn't resist her daughter's pleas, and so had resorted to asking Cui Buqu to persuade Feng Xiao in her stead.

Qin Miaoyu reported that not only had Cui Buqu not seen Feng Xiao for the past few days, he hadn't set foot outside the Zuoyue Bureau at all.

Could he be jealous? Feng Xiao was instantly certain that he was. But given Cui Buqu's reserved and brooding nature, he would never admit it directly. In that case, Feng Xiao would deign to ask after Cui Buqu, lest the poor man make himself ill with sulking. He'd only just managed to recuperate, after all; this would ruin his health all over again.

With this in mind, Deputy Chief Feng tidied his clothes, touched his slightly cool and prickly scalp, and sauntered off toward the Zuoyue Bureau.

At the same time, a different guest had come to call on Cui Buqu.

The chief of the Zuoyue Bureau usually had little patience for socializing, but today, he was in an oddly good mood. He sat down to converse with his guest, demonstrating a rare gentleness.

When Feng Xiao arrived, he found Cui Buqu speaking to a girl with her head slightly bowed, as if bashful. She paused every few words, but Cui Buqu never rushed her.

Feng Xiao was only too familiar with this girl: Yuwen Eying, the granddaughter of the emperor and daughter of Princess Leping.

Yuwen Yihuan had been able to conceal her identity and wreak such havoc only thanks to Princess Leping's secret assistance. If the princess hadn't had a sudden change of heart and rushed to the palace, Empress Dugu might still be bedridden. After those events, the empress and her daughter were now of one heart. The empress couldn't bear to put the princess under house arrest, so two days ago, Yuwen Eying had been granted permission to visit. Grandmother and granddaughter embraced and cried, putting past grievances to rest, and the restrictions on the princess's residence were lifted.

Feng Xiao knew all this—but it didn't explain why Yuwen Eying was here, and speaking so comfortably with Cui Buqu at that.

Neither of them raised their heads when he entered. He pointedly cleared his throat.

Cui Buqu and Yuwen Eying both turned to look at him, and Cui Buqu's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Why has Deputy Chief Feng graced our Zuoyue Bureau with a personal visit? You didn't even send someone to announce your arrival! We've been terribly rude; I beg your pardon."

Feng Xiao had been standing in the doorway for ages. He refused to believe Cui Buqu hadn't seen him. Nevertheless, he smiled brightly. "Please don't be so stiff, Chief Cui. I come see you here every few days, yet I notice you never come to see me. Shall I step back outside and try again so you can welcome me properly?"

Cui Buqu's smile didn't reach his eyes. He gestured toward the doorway. "Please."

Yuwen Eying's gaze darted between them. Something unspeakably odd was going on here. She couldn't classify them as friends because every word they exchanged was barbed. Yet she wasn't certain they were enemies, because they didn't seem to hate each other either.

"Chief Cui?" Yuwen Eying interjected.

Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao turned to her as one. Timidly, she asked, "May I stay at the Zuoyue Bureau tonight?"

"Of course."

"No!"

Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao spoke simultaneously, then glanced at each other. Feng Xiao arched a brow.

Yuwen Eying was baffled. Cui Buqu reassured her gently. “You can stay a few days if you wish, Duchess Yuwen. Just send someone to inform the princess. It’s no trouble.”

Yuwen Eying nodded. “Thank you, Chief Cui!”

Cui Buqu had someone take her to the guest quarters, then turned to Feng Xiao with a slanted smile. “What important business brings Deputy Chief Feng here today?”

Naturally Feng Xiao didn’t say that he was afraid Cui Buqu would elope with a demoness. He followed Cui Buqu’s lead and took a seat, his posture straight-backed and proper. “I merely came to see if Chief Cui was still alive. If you were dead, I’d have come to offer condolences and some money for your funeral.”

“So Deputy Chief Feng hopes I’ll die soon?” said Cui Buqu steadily. “Then all those things you said at my bedside while I was on death’s door were lies?”

Feng Xiao snorted. “What things? My venerable self doesn’t remember!”

Cui Buqu nodded thoughtfully. “As the saying goes, there are three great joys in life: wealth, a promotion, and a dead first wife. It seems Deputy Chief Feng is on the verge of being visited by two of them. Let me be first to offer my congratulations. I hope you climb ever higher and enjoy a hundred years of happiness together.”

Feng Xiao sneered. “Enough with this nonsense. I’m asking—” He stopped short as if he’d choked on a walnut mid-sentence and stared at Cui Buqu. “What did you just say?”

“Climb ever higher, a hundred years of happiness together.”

“Before that!”

“By marrying Princess Lanling, Deputy Chief Feng will climb higher in the hierarchy. Isn’t this the arrival of a great joy?”

Feng Xiao’s gaze sharpened. He leaned forward like a predator watching its prey. “I’m talking about the first line: wealth, a promotion, and a dead first wife!”

Cui Buqu feigned surprise. “Is Deputy Chief Feng cursing Princess Lanling?”

“Stop playing the fool!” Feng Xiao cursed under his breath, grinding his teeth in anger. He could never let his guard down with this man. It was rare to hear a single sincere remark from his lips, and now he was playing it off.

Actions spoke louder than words. Feng Xiao grasped Cui Buqu’s chin, pulling him in for a deep kiss that silenced him completely. Just as Cui Buqu thought he was about to be swallowed, bones and all, Feng Xiao released him. “I’ll give you one more chance—say that line again properly.”

If Cui Buqu were the type to cave to threats, he wouldn’t have been Cui Buqu. “Which line? ‘The empress wishes to arrange a marriage between you and Princess Lanling’?”

Feng Xiao scoffed. “If you’re jealous, just say so. Why beat around the bush?”

Cui Buqu quirked a brow. “And do you dare claim you felt nothing when you saw me with Duchess Yuwen?”

Feng Xiao was fuming. “Do you ever speak an honest word?”

Briefly, Cui Buqu smiled. “Stragglers from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai are still about. After the deaths of Xiao Lü and Yuwen Yihuan, some are taking out their

frustrations on Princess Leping and her daughter. Someone at the princess's residence was poisoned, so Princess Leping is currently residing at the palace. Duchess Yuwen will remain at the Zuoyue Bureau to assist with the investigation. Now are you satisfied?"

"What do you mean *satisfied*?" Feng Xiao drawled, ever the con-trarian. "My venerable self has never cared! I was only needling you earlier. I have no intention of marrying Princess Lanling; I was planning to go to the palace tomorrow to tell the empress as much. Yet here you are working yourself into a panic. You say you're not concerned, but I know you've been gritting your teeth in private. My venerable self had no choice but to step in to reassure you. If you let your personal feelings cloud your judgment and refused to cooperate with the Jiejian Bureau over this, wouldn't that jeopardize our shared mission?"

This man could turn black into white with his outrageous statements. Cui Buqu laughed in anger, then leaned in and sealed that lying mouth with his own lips.

Epilogue 4

GROWING HAIR I

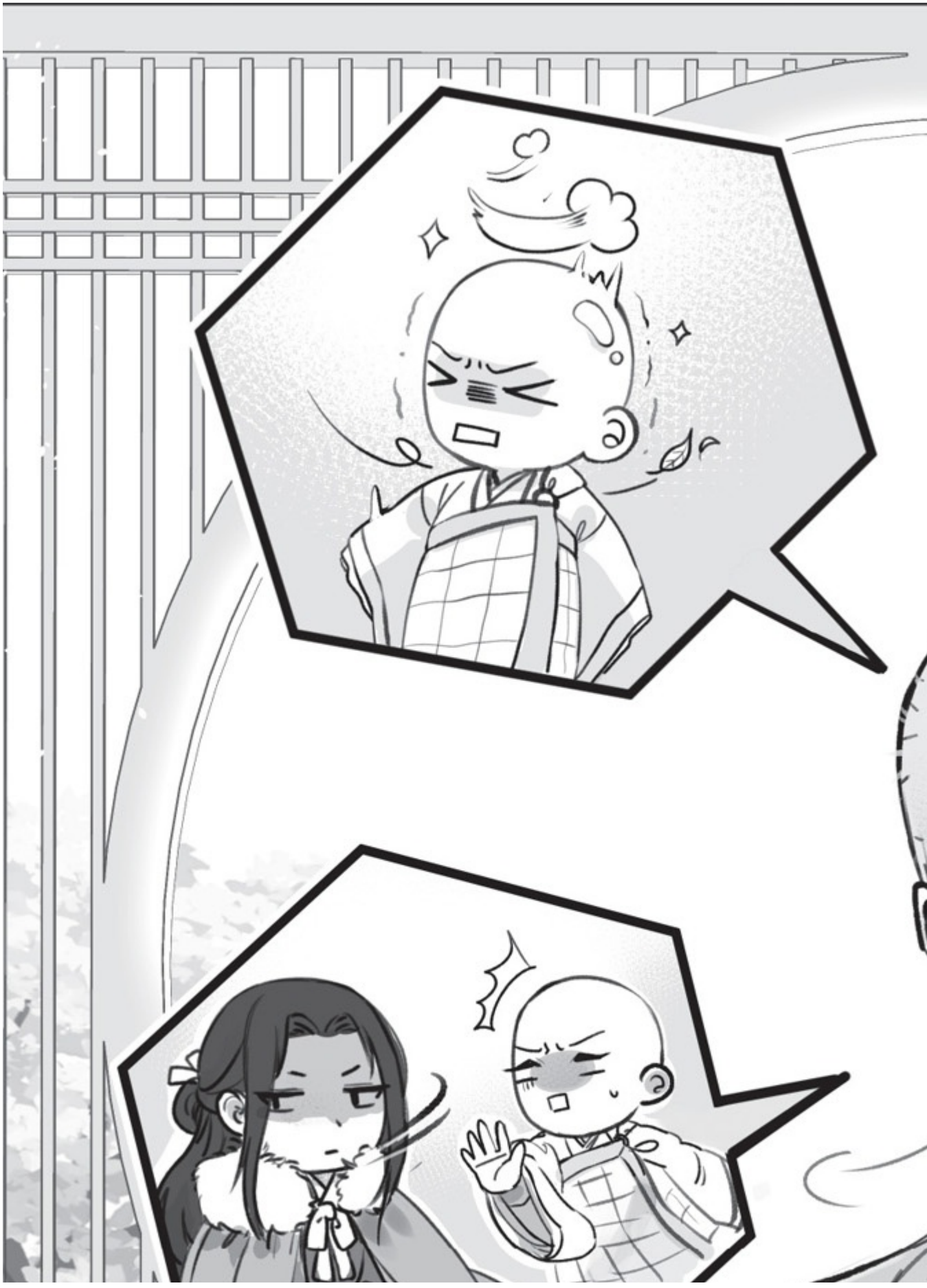
SHAVING ONE'S HAIR OFF was a simple task, but growing it back was not so easy.

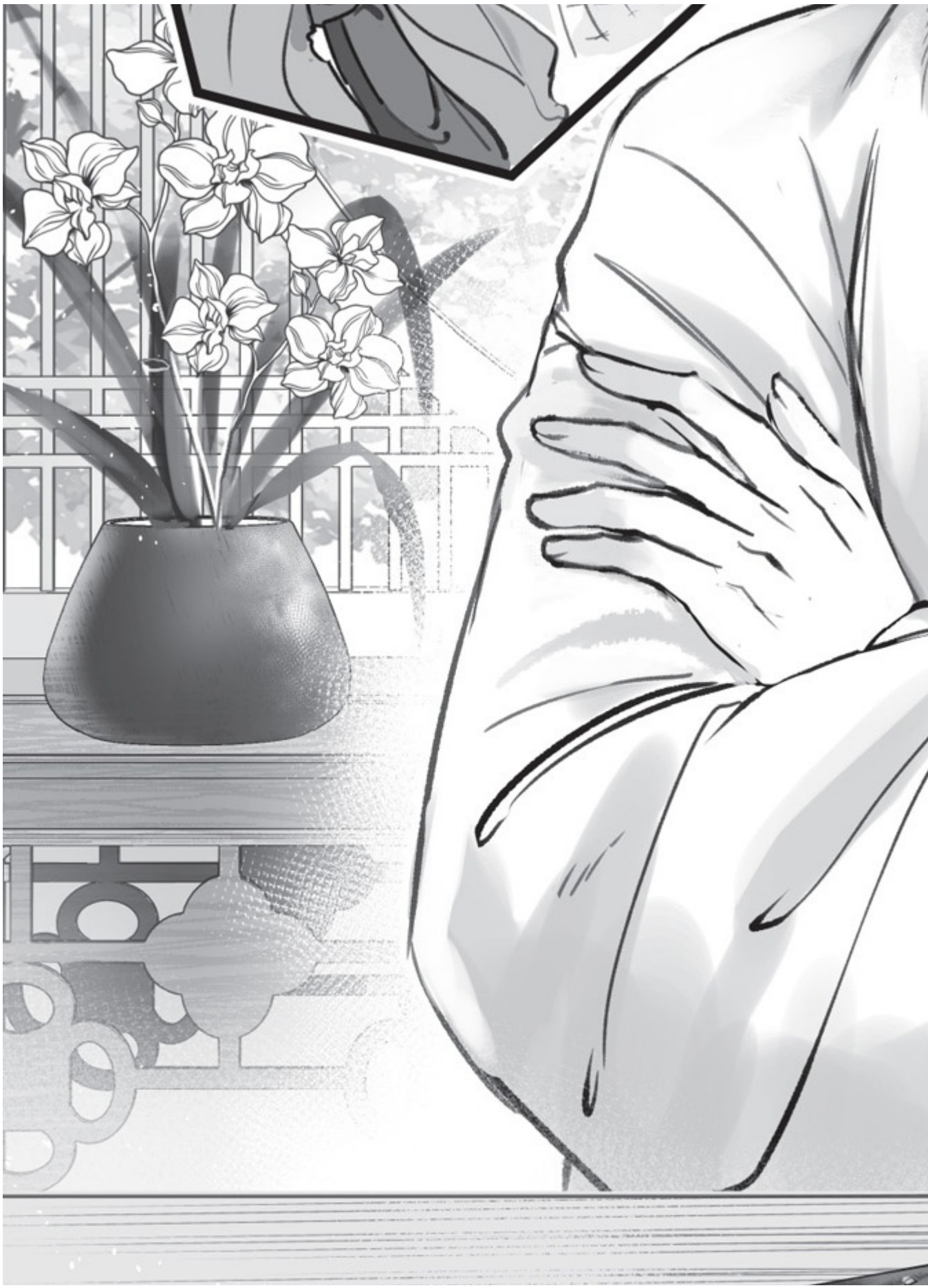
Feng Xiao stroked his fuzzy head. His hair was neither long nor short, and although he'd said nothing, he was quietly searching for remedies to stimulate its growth. He wished with all his might that he would wake up in the morning with enough hair to make a bun again.

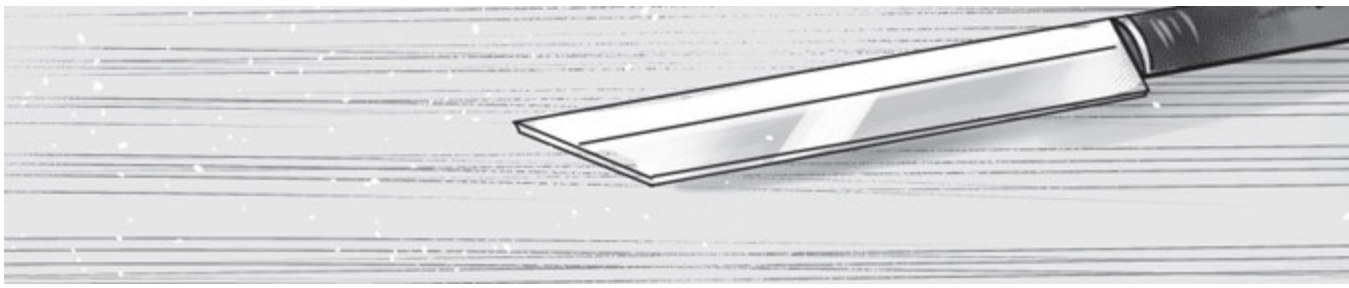
Feng-er, who'd always had absolute confidence in his looks, now felt a sliver of doubt as he gazed in the mirror. He began to pay increasing attention to hair-care formulas. This had to be kept from Cui Buqu at all costs, or he'd definitely come up with some plan to mess with him.

Lately, Qin Miaoyu, too, was troubled. She'd been given a new mission: Deputy Chief Feng had tasked her with finding hair-growth formulas, demanding that his hair grow from half an inch to shoulder length in a month. At the end of that time, the Jiejian Bureau had a mission that would take them to Jiangnan, and Feng-er intended to go himself. Seeing as he'd be out in public, he couldn't look unkempt.

It was impossible—even the gods wouldn't be able to do it. Still, since her superior demanded it, Qin Miaoyu could only do her best.







Three days later, as Feng Xiao stood looking at a bewildering array of items—various herbal baths, acupuncture needles, ointments, even magical talismans—he sank into thought.

JEALOUSY

THE ENTIRE CAPITAL KNEW Princess Lanling had fallen for Feng Xiao. However, due to her reserved nature, she hadn't made her feelings overt. Out of sympathy for their daughter, the emperor and empress had repeatedly suggested marriage to Feng Xiao. Yet, despite their efforts, he remained steadfast in his refusal, leaving them with no choice but to seek another match for their daughter.

Yet Feng Xiao still felt Cui Buqu's reaction to the situation was far too mild. So mild, it was as if he didn't care about Feng Xiao at all.

The next evening, when Cui Buqu came personally to the Jiejian Bureau to discuss business, he found Feng Xiao gone. Pei Jingzhe informed him that Feng-er had left to spend the evening at Changming House.

The name was familiar to Cui Buqu, as was the nature of Chang-ming House's business. Changming House was situated in the pleasure district, but it wasn't just any brothel—this establishment was a gathering spot for musicians and dancers from across the land, and a favorite haunt of the city's wealthy officials.

On the first and fifteenth of each month, Changming House was decorated with lanterns and filled with music so beautiful its melodious notes might have been played by the gods themselves. Why had Feng-er gone to Changming House if not to enjoy himself? Could he be investigating a case?

Cui Buqu had no love of such entertainments. He'd rather spend what free time he had at the Zuoyue Bureau, never stepping outside. But right now, he had urgent business to discuss with Feng Xiao. Sending someone to relay a message would waste valuable time, so he had no choice but to go in person.

He found Feng-er sitting with a few others as the dancers began their performance, their movements graceful and seductive. Upon noticing Chief Cui, he raised a brow.

Cui Buqu didn't acknowledge him. He settled himself in an empty seat a little distance away, as if he and Feng Xiao were strangers.

As the song and dance reached their crescendo, the guests' excitement grew. Some left their seats to dance with the performers. Yet despite the convivial atmosphere, Feng Xiao noticed that Cui Buqu's gaze never met his. His focus was entirely on the dancer. He appeared mesmerized, as if he was watching a celestial maiden descended from heaven itself, unable to tear his eyes away.

Feng-er frowned a little, refusing to admit to a twinge of displeasure.

In any case, it was only a twinge.

Once the song ended, the dancer bowed and gracefully withdrew. Feng-er took the opportunity to saunter over to Cui Buqu and sit beside him. "It's rare to see you here, Chief Cui. How fortuitous. Why don't we share a drink?"

Cui Buqu glanced at him but didn't reply. He returned to watching the dancers.

In a moment of pure impulse, Feng Xiao did something he would soon come to regret—he grasped Cui Buqu's chin and directed his gaze back to himself.

A rush of wind swept up behind them.

Feng Xiao instinctively pulled Cui Buqu into his arms and rolled aside as the surrounding guests sat stunned. Only then did realization dawn: Cui Buqu hadn't been watching the dancer at all. He'd been watching the musician behind her.

The man had drawn a sword from his zither. He swept toward Feng Xiao, intent on killing him.

Alas, Feng Xiao's martial arts had improved drastically after his battle with Xiao Lü at the tavern. He'd broken through his bottleneck and climbed even higher, achieving a grandmaster's level of cultivation. The moves of ordinary experts were obvious and clumsy to his eyes—he and this man were worlds apart.

The assassin was quickly subdued. Upon interrogating him, they learned that despite Xiao Lü's death, remnants of the Thirteenth Floors still roamed the world. The musician had been one of them, steadfastly loyal to Xiao Lü. He wanted revenge, regardless of whether it meant throwing his life away. Even injuring Feng Xiao would have been enough.

But those were all things that happened after. In the moment, Feng Xiao saw Cui Buqu give him a cold smile, as if mocking his overreaction. Silently, he mouthed a single word:

Idiot.

GROWING HAIR II

THE DAY THE JIEJIAN BUREAU went south to Jiangnan, Feng Xiao finally had enough hair to pull into a bun. This was through no effort of his own or Qin Miaoyu's, but thanks to Cui Buqu, who'd gifted him a wig.

Deputy Chief Feng, who'd always prided himself on his peerless elegance and grace, had never foreseen that one day he'd be forced to bear such an indignity. To add insult to injury, the wig was neither black nor white, but a dull gray. Feng Xiao had no idea where Cui Buqu had found the wretched thing. He accepted it with a sneer of disdain.

Yet over ten years later, Cui Buqu would discover that Feng Xiao had stored the hated wig in a box. It was carefully nestled inside, neat and proper, and still looked as good as new.

Bonus Story

THE FIELDS WERE MUDDY after the rain. Dewdrops glimmered, and the scent of fresh grass lingered on the breeze. At a teahouse just off the main road, the noon sun shone down on two men and two horses.

There was only one worker at the teahouse. He hurried over to greet them, helping both men tie their horses to the hitching post before bringing fodder and water.

"Such a small place, but you have everything," Pei Jingzhe said in surprise. "Is business here good?"

The man, who served as the shopkeeper, waiter, and cook all in one, laughed. "You flatter me. I live in that small village right by the main road. It's less than a mile round trip. It's neither time for the spring sowing nor the autumn harvest, so I do a little business here to make things easier on passing travelers."

His remark was directed at Pei Jingzhe, but his eyes darted toward the man beside him. Seeming to sense his gaze, Feng Xiao lifted his head to look at him.

The man looked a bit embarrassed at being caught out. "My lord, forgive me for staring; you're very handsome—I've never seen anyone as elegant as you. I couldn't help but take a few more glances."

"You're quite good-looking yourself," said Feng Xiao. "Though you're nowhere near as handsome as me."

The man scratched his head. "My mother always said I was the best-looking one in our village."

Feng Xiao smiled. "Did your mother ever tell you you're actually a cross-dressing woman?"

The man was taken aback. Then he burst out laughing. "My lord jests. I'm a man through and through."

Feng Xiao looked him over. "The village you mentioned lost most of its able-bodied men to war," he said slowly. "The remaining inhabitants are the elderly, infants too young to speak, and women. Yet you are both young and strong. If you're not a cross-dressing woman, what are you?"

Pei Jingzhe had just raised the teacup to his lips when he heard this. He suddenly felt that the cup was scorching hot and yearned to fling it away.

The man noticed Pei Jingzhe's movements and laughed again.

"What are you laughing at?" Pei Jingzhe asked.

The man grinned. "I'm laughing at how pathetic Deputy Chief Feng's subordinates are! Look at you. How on earth did the Jiejian Bureau manage to eradicate so many experts from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai? It's truly unfathomable."

Pei Jingzhe leapt up and glared at the man. If Feng Xiao hadn't said anything, he would have attacked. But—

"You're not his match," Feng Xiao said.

The man smiled again. “As expected, Deputy Chief Feng is most astute.”

“Who are you?!” cried Pei Jingzhe.

“Who he is isn’t important,” said Feng Xiao. “Your question should be ‘why is he here?’”

The man nodded. “Then why don’t you tell me, Deputy Chief Feng—why am I here?”

“You know my name,” said Feng Xiao. “So you’ve been waiting for me specifically. But I have no idea what you want so badly that you’d set up a roadside shelter in the rain just to meet me.”

“I want your sect leader’s seal,” said the man.

His appearance wasn’t particularly striking—in contrast to Feng Xiao’s jade-like complexion, his skin was tanned by the sun. But as he spoke those calm and unremarkable words, an invisible pressure rolled toward them. Pei Jingzhe found his knees buckling and had to grab the table for support in order not to embarrass himself. *Shit*.

As the saying went, those with good intentions didn’t show up uninvited. Pei Jingzhe fretted silently. If his real lord were here, he would have nothing to worry about. But right now…

If something could go wrong, it would. Pei Jingzhe’s unease was instantly vindicated when the man narrowed his eyes at Feng Xiao.

“You’re not Feng Xiao.”

Feng Xiao fanned himself, unperturbed. “Why do you say so?”

The man glanced at Pei Jingzhe. “Just now, his expression was panicked. He’s afraid I’ll attack. Besides, the real Feng Xiao would have recognized me by now.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “Miao Wenxin, it’s true I’m not your match. But if you harm me, you’ll find yourself even further from what you want—the Fajing Sect leader’s seal.”

His identity exposed, the man snorted. “You know who I am. But who are you?!”

Miao Wenxin had never been able to keep his temper in check. If he had, he wouldn’t have lost the position of Fajing Sect leader. When he saw that the fake Feng Xiao was unwilling to answer his question, fury surged in him. He struck out with his palm.

In recent years, Miao Wenxin had become infamous in the jianghu for massacring entire families. People quaked in fear upon hearing his name. He spent some of his time in the south and traveled in Goguryeo at others. The Central Plains were currently divided, but even if they had been unified, someone as powerful as Miao Wenxin would have been difficult to capture.

An ominous feeling rose in Pei Jingzhe. He, too, had heard this man’s name. He felt the crushing wind of Miao Wenxin’s palm sweeping toward them like a raging storm of ice and frost and swiftly countered, thrusting his sword at Miao Wenxin’s face.

To his surprise, Miao Wenxin abandoned his attack on Feng Xiao and turned to target him instead.

Pei Jingzhe fell back at once. Within seconds, the two were fighting furiously on the main road beside the teahouse.

After all the trouble they'd had with the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, Pei Jingzhe had begun to feel increasingly inadequate, both physically and mentally. He feared his shortcomings would hold the Jiejian Bureau back. Determined to improve himself, he became more diligent in his training. But success on the path of martial arts depended on three things: talent, effort, and experience. Despite his efforts, Pei Jingzhe lacked any extraordinary aptitude, and his lack of experience amplified his struggles. How could he possibly catch up in such a short period of time? The longer he fought, the more panicked he became. No more than twenty moves later, Miao Wenxin struck his acupoint and landed a heavy blow on his chest. Pei Jingzhe crashed to the ground.

"Trash!" Miao Wenxin sneered at them. "The two of you dare pose as members of the Fajing Sect with your paltry capabilities?"

He approached Feng Xiao, his steps deliberate.

Feng Xiao sighed. "Are you not curious, Miao Wenxin? I might not be the real Feng Xiao, but I know everything about you and the Fajing Sect. I even know what you came here for."

Of course the fake Feng Xiao wasn't a match for Miao Wenxin—because he was Cui Buqu in disguise. The chief of the Zuoyue Bureau didn't know a lick of martial arts. Forget about a palm strike—even a flick of Miao Wenxin's finger would leave him gravely injured. But such was Chief Cui's power: Even in this scenario, a single sentence from him stopped Miao Wenxin in his tracks.

"Hand over the sect leader's seal and I might spare your life," he said.

Cui Buqu smiled. "The seal isn't with me, but I know where it is."

Miao Wenxin moved like lightning. He sealed Cui Buqu's acupoints and grabbed his shoulder. "Take me to it."

***

And where was the true Deputy Chief Feng at this moment?

He was handling a case. More specifically, he was wearing Cui Buqu's face as he played weiqi and discussed philosophy with a woman from Silla. The woman was no ordinary commoner, but rather Commandery Princess Bogyeong, the daughter of the nation's king.

Fragrant incense curled through the air as the princess chatted and laughed. No matter how one looked at it, Feng Xiao seemed here to enjoy himself rather than investigate. Standing beside them, Qiao Xian could see that Feng Xiao's hand was practically on top of Princess Bogyeong's delicate fingers. He pulled Cui Buqu's face into a lecherous grin. Qiao Xian's eye twitched.

"What's wrong with your guard?" asked Princess Bogyeong sweetly. "Does he want you to leave?"

"Please pay him no mind. He's unwell; he was born with a condition that makes him twitch from time to time. But he's loyal, so I kept him around. If you find him off-putting, I'll send him away."

You're the one who's unwell! thought Qiao Xian. She wiped all expression from her face and stared straight ahead.

The tale of how she had ended up here with Feng Xiao, disguised as a man, was a long one. Silla was one of a trio of kingdoms in the northern peninsula, along with Baekje and Goguryeo, that had maintained a delicate balance of power for years. Goguryeo had been bent on invading the Central Plains for just as long. They'd tried several times, using methods both covert and overt, and their royal house had even established the Buyeo Sect, which had served the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai to oppose the Central Plains.

The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai had collapsed with the death of Xiao Lü, but remnant forces remained hidden in the dark, plotting their revival. And although Goguryeo and Silla were mortal enemies, Princess Bogyeong happened to have deep ties to the fallen Buyeo Sect.

Feng Xiao had learned from Cui Buqu that Princess Bogyeong had a reputation for promiscuity and a fondness for beautiful men. Years ago, a martial arts manual belonging to the Hehuan Sect had fallen into her hands. The book detailed parasitic cultivation techniques, and she'd taken to them like a fish to water. As if this wasn't enough on its own, the king of Silla spoiled her rotten, and thus the princess did whatever she pleased in her home country.

But her arrogance was only one aspect of her character. According to reports obtained by the Zuoyue Bureau, she maintained clandestine communications with both the Thirteen Floors and the Göktürks. She even had a complex built in Silla, Mangseong Pavilion, where she kept a number of handsome young men. Ostensibly this was for her own amusement, but in truth, it was a facility for training assassins used to eliminate the crown prince of Silla's enemies. Her Mangseong Pavilion had also collaborated with the Thirteen Floors to stir up trouble in the Central Plains.

Feng Xiao's own sect, the Fajing Sect, had once had a member by the name of Miao Wenxin. He had been the martial brother of the previous sect leader, Guang Lingsan. Yet at some point they turned on each other, and Miao Wenxin had renounced the sect and disappeared. Rumor said he'd gone to Silla, where he'd grown close to Princess Bogyeong and—perhaps—become a trusted confidant.

Cui Buqu had recently been ordered to look into several murder cases involving court officials. After a thorough investigation, all leads pointed to this Miao Wenxin. The case now not only had the attention of the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus, it also involved Feng Xiao's sect. Naturally both Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu had taken a special interest.

As for why the two were disguised as each other, the first reason was that, while Princess Bogyeong had a taste for handsome men, she disdained those like Feng Xiao, who overshadowed her brilliance. She much preferred a man like Cui Buqu, the fair and handsome Daoist scholar. The colder and more aloof a man was, the more he hewed to her taste, and so Cui Buqu was the most suitable choice.

The second reason was that Princess Bogyeong was surrounded by experts. She herself was a decent martial artist, while also being sly and unpredictable. Although Cui Buqu was clever, he'd be easy prey in an ambush. Feng Xiao had thought it safest if he handled the case himself.

As for the third reason, before they'd set out, they'd finally received news of Miao Wenxin's whereabouts. Cui Buqu had taken men in pursuit, leaving Feng Xiao

on his own. He'd had no choice but to be the one to confront Princess Bogyeong whether he wished to or not.

The princess's true interest wasn't in the game. They'd barely started playing when she fluttered her lashes at Feng Xiao. "Zhou-langjun, you said you're an old acquaintance of Miao Wenxin. Why have I never heard Miao-lang mention you?"

She merely brushed Feng Xiao's fingertips, yet the touch was seductive and lingering, like she was unfastening his garments instead. Even the most experienced of men would find themselves helpless before such charms. Sure enough, Feng Xiao's gaze flickered, and he took on a dazed look, as if entranced. A moment later, he seemed to master himself and bring his focus back to the match.

Princess Bogyeong was secretly delighted. She loved men, but what she truly enjoyed wasn't the pleasures of the flesh. It was watching exceptional men grovel at her feet. The prouder and more aloof a man was, the more she relished the challenge. And Feng Xiao was, without a doubt, the finest specimen she'd encountered in some years.

"I'm not surprised he didn't mention me. When he fled our sect, he stole one of our manuals—he's too ashamed to bring up his martial siblings. But he was good to me while we were both in the sect, and we still share some sentimental attachment. The sect recently got word that he was in the Central Plains and issued an order to kill him. I heard the princess was acquainted with him, so I came to pass along a warning."

"Hm?" Princess Bogyeong's soft hum was sweet enough to melt men's bones. "So you came for him, and not for me."

She raised a slender finger, rosy at the end where it'd been dipped in the juice of balsam flowers, and lightly poked Feng Xiao's forehead. "Scoundrel!"

"But after meeting the princess…" Feng Xiao sighed softly. Princess Bogyeong raised her lovely eyes to look at him. He finished, "I thought it a pity."

"What's a pity?"

"The princess is so lovely and charming, while Miao Wenxin's looks and conduct are the opposite. Yet you took such an interest in him. Isn't that a pity?"

He did his best imitation of Cui Buqu's cold and arrogant countenance and biting tone. As expected, Princess Bogyeong was momentarily overwhelmed. Then she giggled sweetly. "Miao Wenxin isn't as bad as you say—but compared to you, he's as a spark to the bright moon. A vast chasm lies between you." She threw down her weiqi piece and pouted. "I don't want to play anymore. Let's do something more exhilarating."

Her fingers trailed up Feng Xiao's wrist and arm, separated from his skin by a single layer of fabric. Her gaze on him was ravenous, as if she wished to devour him whole. She cast a glance at Qiao Xian and giggled. "Your guard is quite handsome himself. If he insists on staying, why not let him join in on the fun?"

Feng Xiao hooked a finger beneath her chin. "What kind of fun?"

"Whatever you like," said the princess. "I'll follow your lead. However, I have one condition. You must bring the real owner of your face to me. I've no interest in a low-quality counterfeit."

Before Qiao Xian could react, the two maids who'd been standing like wooden puppets behind the princess were lunging toward her. Qiao Xian had surrendered her

sword upon entering, yet even unarmed, she held her ground against her two opponents.

Princess Bogyeong had no interest in the fight. Her eyes remained fixed on Feng Xiao. “Every move you make, every frown and smile, is beyond what the average person can replicate. You must be quite handsome yourself. Let me see your real face, then we can discuss your motives for approaching me under the guise of Miao-lang’s sectmate.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “I’ve long heard of the princess’s beauty. When the opportunity to see you arose, I couldn’t help but be curious.”

“And now that you’ve seen me, what do you think?”

“You’re nothing special.”

The princess’s smile turned cold. “I dare you to say that again.”

“I said you’re ordinary—no different from the mediocre masses. And your laugh resembles the clucking of a hen! If I didn’t think you had information on the remnants of the Thirteen Floors, my venerable self would never waste my precious face and time on you. Now that everything’s out in the open, it certainly makes things easier. Come, I’ll let you choose: Will it be the Zuoyue Bureau or the Jiejian Bureau?”

“The gentleman has no manners. You dare speak to me this way in my own territory?!” Princess Bogyeong sneered. “Go on then, but first tell me—can you move anything right now besides your mouth?”

Feng Xiao found it was true: He was frozen in place. “What did you do to me?”

The princess’s beautiful lip curled. “The weiqi pieces. From the moment you touched them, you were poisoned by a secret drug from Silla. Without the antidote, your flesh and bones will grow increasingly stiff until you die as rigid as a wooden puppet. You can become one of the dolls in my collection; won’t that be nice?”

She stroked Feng Xiao’s face, ghosting her fingers over his chin. “Where does the mask start? I can’t find the seam. Whoever disguised you must be remarkably skilled.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “The artist is fighting your subordinates right now. Could you please remove your fingers—you’re so ugly I’ll need to take several baths now that you’ve touched me.”

Princess Bogyeong felt a sudden sharp pain in her chest. She flew backward and crashed heavily to the floor.

The two maids were stunned. Before they could rush to their mistress, Feng Xiao flashed in front of them.

They were decent martial artists who could hold their own against Qiao Xian, but before Feng Xiao, they were little better than clay chickens. Neither of them could land even a single blow.

Princess Bogyeong clutched her chest on the ground, coughing up blood. Her eyes were wide with disbelief. “How did you—”

Feng Xiao shook his head. “I did wonder why Xiao Lü never valued you. With your skills, why couldn’t you secure a position within the Thirteen Floors yourself? Turns out you were simply too stupid. If you can use poison, why can’t I?”

Princess Bogyeong coughed up more blood in rage, her eyes bulging.

Feng Xiao turned to Qiao Xian. “Your lord spent so long coddling you, yet you’re completely useless in his time of need. If he were here today instead of me, wouldn’t this woman have devoured you both?”

Qiao Xian internally rolled her eyes. *How do you know this wasn’t all part of our lord’s plan? He knows you’re good at dealing with this type of woman. He just gave you a chance to show off.*

Feng Xiao ignored her silent censure. He dusted himself off and sauntered toward the exit. Before leaving, he tossed instructions over his shoulder. “Summon some people and clean this up properly. Princess Bogyeong has many capable subordinates; don’t mess up something this easy.”

“What about you?” Qiao Xian called after him.

“Me? Naturally, I’m going to play the hero who saves the beauty.”

He disappeared through the door without looking back.

***

Somehow, Feng-er hadn’t expected that following the hints Cui Buqu left him would lead not to the rescue of a beauty, but instead to this bizarre scene: Miao Wenxin, tied to a tree, screaming a torrent of filthy words. Even Feng Xiao frowned at the racket.

The beauty he sought was reading in the shade of the tree, as if Miao Wenxin didn’t exist.

Feng Xiao hadn’t anticipated that Cui Buqu would confront Miao Wenxin so quickly. Miao Wenxin was a skilled martial artist. Even two of Pei Jingzhe shouldn’t have been enough to defeat him, let alone the sickly Cui Buqu. Despite acting separately, it seemed they’d each met with similarly unforeseen events. For example, Feng Xiao hadn’t foreseen that Princess Bogyeong would be even uglier than he imagined…

But he digressed.

Feng Xiao looked more closely at Miao Wenxin and found that what he had assumed to be ropes binding him to the tree were in truth zither strings that cut into his flesh. “Who was here? Guang Lingsan?” he asked suspiciously. “Don’t tell me you were colluding with him the entire time?”

Cui Buqu looked up from his book. “What do you mean *colluding*? I should have expected your dog mouth to put it that way.”

Feng-er snorted and plucked up a stone. He threw it at Miao Wenxin’s mute acupoint, cutting off his stream of profanity.

“He was willing to see you but doesn’t have the guts to meet with me?”

“I suspect he wanted to spare himself the sight of a peacock strutting about.”

The last words came out around a cough. One was followed by several more, until he was forced to set aside his book and clutch his chest.

Feng Xiao looked at Cui Buqu with disdain. He knelt and pulled him into his arms, channeling internal energy into him to soothe his breathing.

"Why didn't he take Miao Wenxin with him?" he said when he was done.

"Leaving him with the Zuoyue Bureau has its uses. We can extract valuable information about the Buyeo Sect and the remnants of the Thirteen Floors from him; he knows we won't miss any clues." Cui Buqu coughed twice more and added, "Guang Lingsan has been tracking Miao Wenxin's whereabouts for some time. He was the one who came to me and shared this lead in the first place."

"But you didn't tell me." Dissatisfaction colored Feng Xiao's tone.

Cui Buqu's lips curved, ever so slightly. "That was at his request as well. I'm impartial in this; I can't go back on my word. He has his own reasons for not wanting to see you."

Feng Xiao sneered. "He's just afraid I'll return the Fajing Sect to him!"

Cui Buqu doubled over again, his coughs growing louder. Feng Xiao fell silent. He began channeling internal energy to Cui Buqu in even greater quantities.

The essence of the Jade of Heaven Lake had improved Cui Buqu's health significantly, but he'd never be truly well. His ailments were chronic, a result of ill health at birth exacerbated by torment suffered in his childhood. From time to time, some malady or other was guaranteed to flare up and trouble him.

It was a long time before his coughing gradually eased.

Miao Wenxin, gagged and bound to the tree, felt he was about to suffocate.

He'd spent the first half of his life prideful and defiant, the second half drifting aimlessly. After leaving the Fajing Sect, he'd thought a wider world with grander opportunities awaited him. Yet after years of collaborating with the Buyeo Sect and conspiring with Princess Bogyeong, he seemed to be going in circles, unable to earn any of the recognition he felt he deserved. The Fajing Sect was the most elusive of the three demonic sects, their forces hidden deep within the imperial court—yet even after casting them aside, Miao Wenxin had wasted so many years and achieved nothing. He was more miserable now than ever. Of course he was dissatisfied.

That resentment yearned for release. But when Guang Lingsan had captured him, he'd said nothing. He'd simply tied him to this tree and drifted away. Even the pair in front of him—

These two…

Miao Wenxin watched as the Feng-Cui pair whispered in each other's ears, their cheeks brushing. They were ignoring him completely, as if he was a tree trunk or a stone. It was infuriating!

Anger roiled in Miao Wenxin's chest. He wanted to howl at the sky and drown them both in his spittle. But even when he choked on his own blood in rage, neither of them turned to look at him.

How he hated them! If the heavens would only grant him another chance, if he could return to the time when he'd still been in the Fajing Sect—

Darkness clouded his vision, and he knew no more.

"This guy is too annoying. I can't enjoy myself at all if I have to look at him!" Feng Xiao complained, hoisting Cui Buqu up in his arms. "I'll send Pei Jingzhe to

deal with the mess.”

Cui Buqu rolled his eyes.

Pei Jingzhe, feeding mosquitoes a distance away, felt an inexplicable shiver go up his spine.

Peerless
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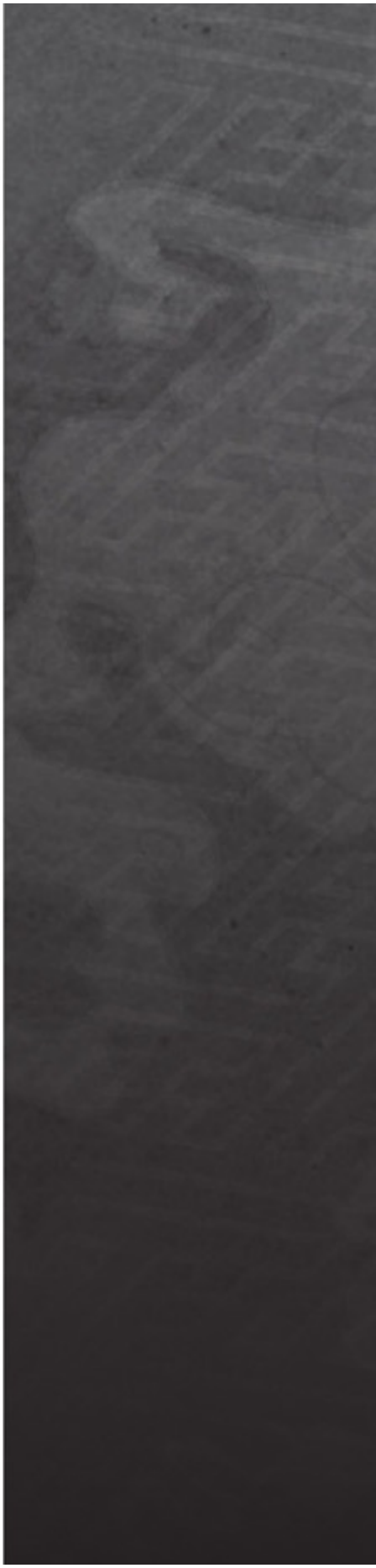

Character & Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Peerless is set in the first era of the Sui dynasty, Kaihuang. Emperor Wen of Sui (given name Yang Jian) established his dynasty in 581 AD after usurping the throne from the previous Zhou dynasty. Though Sui was a short-lived dynasty that eventually fell apart in the hands of his son, Emperor Yang, Emperor Wen is viewed as one of the most influential emperors of ancient China, both for his prosperous rule and for the reunification of the Central Plains after over two hundred years of war and turmoil.

CHARACTERS

FENG XIAO □□ ("HIGH HEAVENS"): Deputy Chief of the Jiejian Bureau. Courtesy name Yuntian.

CUI BUQU □□□ ("I WON'T GO"): Chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

JIEJIAN BUREAU

PEI JINGZHE □□□: Feng Xiao's beleaguered assistant at the Jiejian Bureau.

MING YUE □□: Third chief of the Jiejian Bureau.

ZUOYUE BUREAU

GUAN SHANHAI □□□: A martial official, assigned by Empress Dugu to Cui Buqu.

QIAO XIAN □□: Member of the Zuoyue Bureau.

SONG LIANGCHEN □□□: Deputy Chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

ZHANGSUN BODHI □□□□: Deputy Chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

SUI IMPERIAL COURT

YANG JIAN □□: Emperor Wen of Sui, the first emperor of the Sui dynasty.

DUGU QIELUO □□□□: Empress Wenxian.

YANG YONG □□: The crown prince and eldest son of Yang Jian and Empress Dugu.

YANG GUANG □□: The Prince of Jin and second son of Yang Jian and Empress Dugu.

YANG JUN □□: The Prince of Qin and third son of Yang Jian and Empress Dugu.

YANG LIHUA □□□: Princess Leping, Yang Jian and Empress Dugu's eldest daughter and the former empress of the previous Zhou dynasty.

YANG A-WU □□□: Princess Lanling, Yang Jian and Empress Dugu's daughter.

YUWEN EYING □□□□: The daughter of Yang Lihua and the emperor of the previous dynasty, Yuwen Yun.

THIRTEEN FLOORS OF YUNHAI

XIAO LÜ □□: The pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors.

FAN YUN □□: Second in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. Cui Buqu's teacher.

YUXIU □□: Third in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. A monk who was once the trusted consultant of Yang Guang, the Prince of Jin.

YUAN SANSI □□□: Fourth in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. The former governor of Boling Commandery and a childhood friend of Cui Buqu's mother.

LIN YONG □□: Seventh in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. The young estate master of Yandang Mountain Estate.

GUANGQIAN COMMANDERY

YANG YUN □□: Governor of Guangqian Commandery and Yang Jian's nephew.

HUANG LÜE □□: Magistrate of Guangqian County.

LI YAN □□: Assistant magistrate of Guangqian County.

RONG QING □□: An imperial censor assigned to oversee Guangqian County's disaster relief efforts.

WU YI □□: Lieutenant of Guangqian County.

GÖKTÜRK KHAGANATE

KUHEZHEN □□□: The seventh prince of the Eastern Khaganate, son of Ishbara Khagan.

TU'AN QINGHE □□□□: A martial artist and successor of Hulugu from the Khaganate.

OTHER

BING XIAN □□: A martial artist from the Hehuan Sect.

NAMES, HONORIFICS, & TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

DA-: A character meaning "eldest." Can be used as a prefix.

-ER: Usually a character meaning “child.” When added to a name as a suffix, it expresses affection. However, Feng Xiao’s nickname, “Feng-er,” uses a different character that means “second.” Thus, in *Peerless*, “Feng-er” is an abbreviated way of saying “Deputy Bureau Chief Feng Xiao.”

LAO-: A friendly prefix meaning “old.”

XIAO-: A character meaning “small” or “youngest.” When added to a name as a prefix, it expresses affection.

Courtesy Addresses

GONGZI: A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it’s often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

LANG: A general term for “man.” Can be used to politely address a man by pairing it with other characters that denote his place within a certain household. For example, “dalang,” “erlang,” and “sanlang” mean “eldest son,” “second son,” and “third son” respectively. “Langjun” is a polite address for any man, similar to “gentleman.” The suffix -lang can also be used as an endearment for one’s male lover.

NIANG: A general term for “woman,” which can be appended as a suffix. Follows the same pairing rules as “lang.” “Niangzi” is a variant that can be used alone to address any woman, similar to “lady.”

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used to refer to younger disciples of the same generation.

XIANDI: A respectful address for a younger man.

XIANSHENG: A polite address for men, originally only for those of great learning or those who had made significant contributions to society. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Family

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

MEI/MEIMEI: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own sect, or junior male disciples of one’s own master.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one’s own sect, or junior female disciples of one’s own master.

SHIMU: The wife of one’s master.

SHIBO: Martial uncle. For the shixiong of one's master.

Other

XIANZHI: Virtuous nephew. A respectful address for the son of one's friends.

-CHANSHI: a suffix meaning monk.

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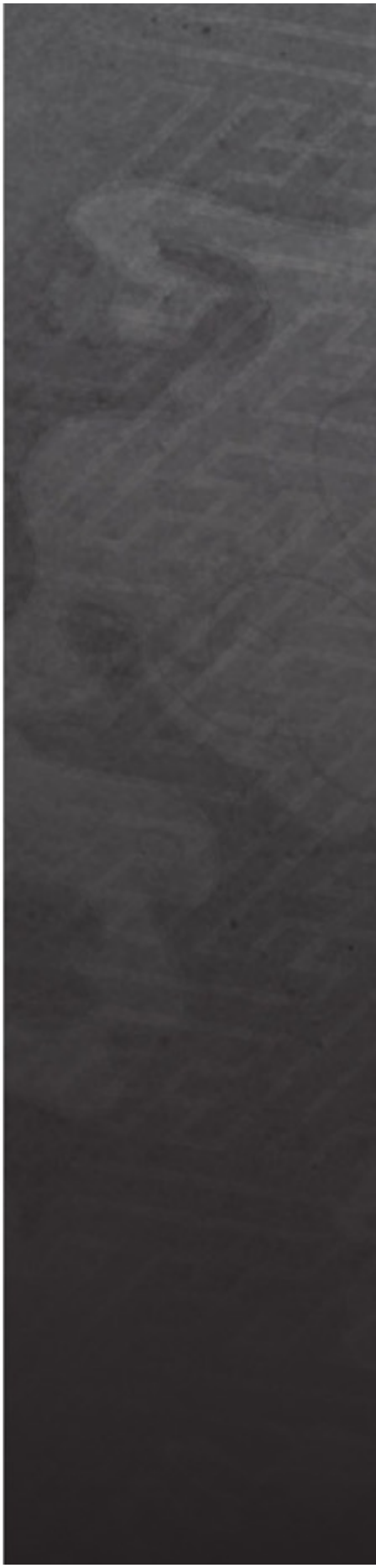


GLOSSARY

BAGUA: Also known as the eight trigrams of Fuxi; a set of eight symbols arranged in an octagon that surrounds the taijitu, or yin-yang symbol. It is the Daoist representation of all things in the universe. The symbols—qian, dui, li, zhen, xun, kan, gen, ku—are all associated with a cardinal or intercardinal direction.

DIVINATION: Fortune-telling was an art of the highly learned in ancient China, with many separate branches, all rooted in Daoism. One example was physiognomy, where one reads a person's fate and state of health through their facial features, complexion, body, and bones. Another was geomancy, often known as feng shui, where the diviner could read the "auspiciousness" associated with a location or placement via the qi flowing through the area. Another is Ziping divination, where the fortune teller calculates one's fate through their birth date.

GU: A type of dark art that traditionally involves sealing many venomous creatures in one vessel to fight and consume each other until only one survivor remains. This survivor would then possess the strongest poison compounded from the individual creatures' poisons, and would become the basis for techniques. The term can also cover any dark arts that use poisonous and parasitic creatures as its base.

NINE-RANK SYSTEM: During the Sui dynasty, officials were divided into ranks, which denoted their status within the court. First rank was the highest, ninth rank the lowest.

PAPER MONEY: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing—or in wuxia, to render someone unconscious.

Another central concept in traditional Chinese medicine is that disease arises from an imbalance of elements in the body caused by disharmony in internal functions. For example, an excess of internal heat can cause symptoms such as fever, thirst, insomnia, and redness of the face. Excess internal heat can be treated with the consumption of foods with cooling properties, such as lotus tea.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows,

femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

Footnotes

Chapter 156

[1] An idiom from the fictionalized Battle of Red Cliffs in Romance of the Three Kingdoms wherein Shu Han military advisor Zhuge Liang performs a ritual to summon an easterly wind, the final element necessary to ensure victory against the enemy Cao Wei army. Here, the east wind is a metaphor for the “crucial final factor.”

Chapter 157

[2] A common idiom. A weasel is someone with bad or insincere intentions, while the chicken is their clueless target.

[3] Meaning “miss” or “maiden.” A polite address for young and unmarried women or girls.

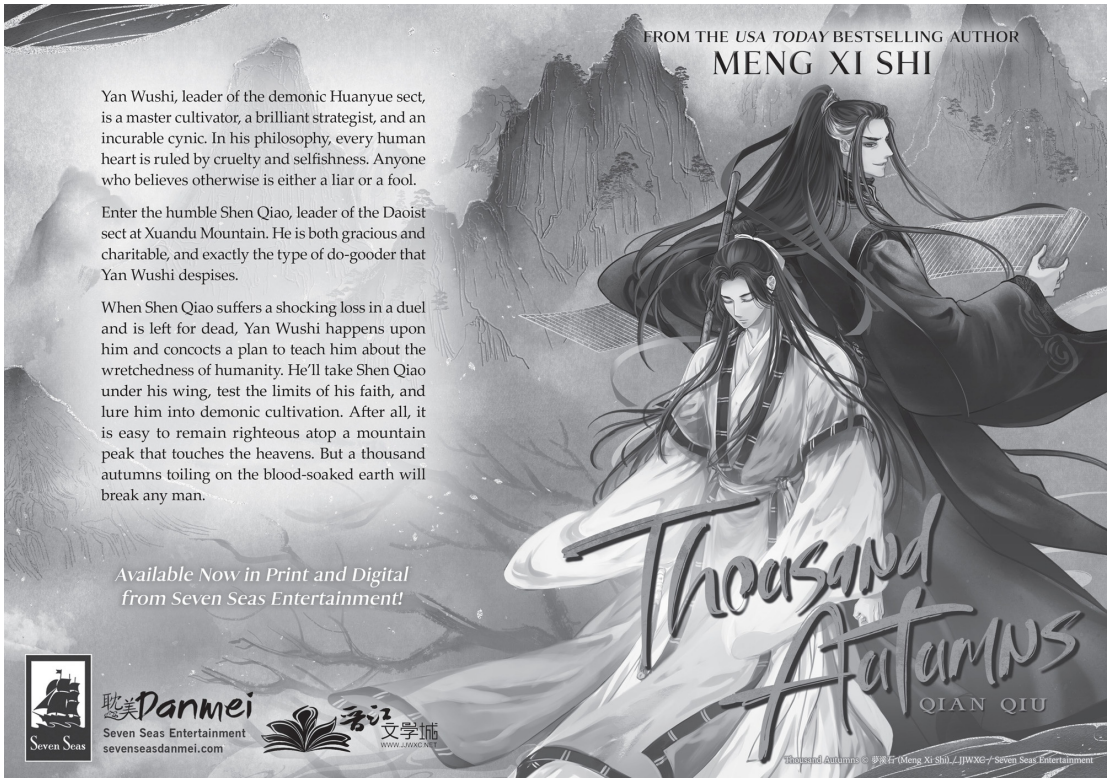
Chapter 175

[4] Lines from the Book of Jin, Treatises 2 (Volume 12).

About the Author

Meng Xi Shi

Meng Xi Shi is a renowned web author whose works of fiction combine detailed research with witty writing, winning the hearts of readers around the world. Her works are published in China by Jingjiang Literature City. She goes by “Meng Xi Shi Ya” on Weibo.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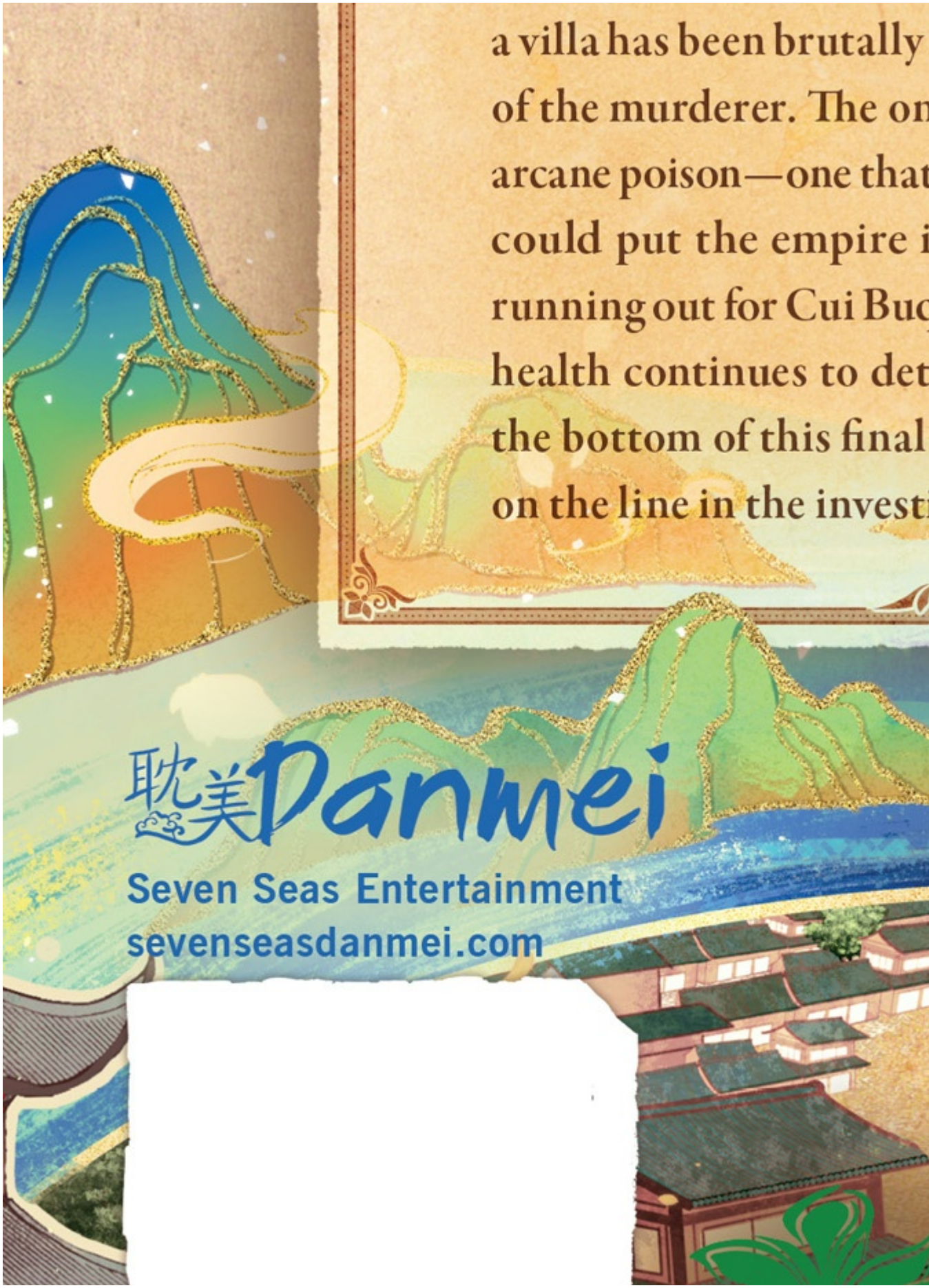
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